Reckoning

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Reckoning

by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Summary

Part Five in the AU where Hannibal is a troubled FBI profiler and Will is a psychiatrist and serial killer.

Chapter 1

For a long time, the pain is the only thing that's real for Hannibal.

He sinks down into it, lost and disorientated, and finds himself back in Will's basement; it comes to him in a sudden bolt of realization that is as painful as the burning in his stomach, that he has never really left - that everything else has only been a happy dream, brought on perhaps by the drugs with which Will injected him.

He is bound at the wrists and ankles, strapped to the table, naked except for a thin shift. There is a rasping pain in his throat, some inexplicable but hellish obstruction that hisses and chokes him when he tries to work it free with his lips and tongue, but the real agony is in his belly.

It hurts so badly, Hannibal understands, because Will is cutting him. He knows this, though he cannot see or hear or even smell Will, through the logic of dreams, and in the same way he knows with a certainty that there is nothing that he can say or do that will stop the thing that is happening to him.

Eventually though, the pain begins to fade, drifting away like a boat moving off over the horizon, and as he slides down into a quieter sort of fog than the one that has held him braced in agony he thinks, *I am going into shock. I'll be dead soon.*

It is not exactly a fearful thought, but it is extremely bitter.

Hannibal has no means of measuring how much time goes by before the pain returns, but come back it does, and as bad as ever.

Speaking to Will can make no difference, and he resolves to bear this out in silence until it is over with. But the hurting goes on and on and on, and eventually he loses patience. He wants to demand of Will, *Haven't you taken enough from me already? How much more before you're sated?* but when he tries to speak he finds he has no voice.

This returns to him his awareness of the hard plastic obstruction in his throat. He tries to shout around it, to voice his outrage at this strange intrusion, somehow more distressing than the certainty that he has been sliced open and gutted, and when he does so the thing chokes him again.

It's that feeling of being strangled that drags Hannibal to something approaching real consciousness for the first time in days. His distress draws someone to him, and Hannibal looks up at the face looking down at him and sees that it is not Will.

It's the face of someone unknown to him, and though Hannibal is not a man who expects kindness from strangers, the complete lack of compassion in her detached gaze makes him turn his own eyes away, suddenly and inexplicably ashamed of himself. His vision is hazy, but from the corner of his eye he thinks he sees an I.V. pole.

"Don't fight the ventilator," the woman says. "It's helping you to breathe."

But her words are incomprehensible to him and quickly forgotten has it dawns on him that his brain, in an effort to make sense of his body's agony, has told him a terrible lie - while it's clear that

something is very wrong and that he is in bad trouble, none of this has come about through Will's hand, and he is able to hold onto that understanding as he falls back into a narcotic-fueled sleep.

When he wakes again the pain inspired by the thing in his throat has usurped his focus from the stabbing pains in his belly, and even worse than the obstruction is the thirst. The inside of Hannibal's mouth feels to him to be as dry as leather, and he remembers bringing water to Will after the judge sliced him up. He wonders, hurt at first but increasingly angry as the thirst grows more urgent, why Will doesn't bother to do the same now that he is so obviously in need.

Will has always taken such good care of him, and as Hannibal starts to grasp that he is not here now, despite Hannibal's terrible need for him, he begins to fear that Will might be dead.

He struggles to remember what happened, but his thoughts are sluggish and grey, and it is a long time before he can gather enough of the threads together to be able to say to himself, *This is a hospital.*

The next thought comes more quickly, riding on the coattails of the one before it: *I've been gutshot.*

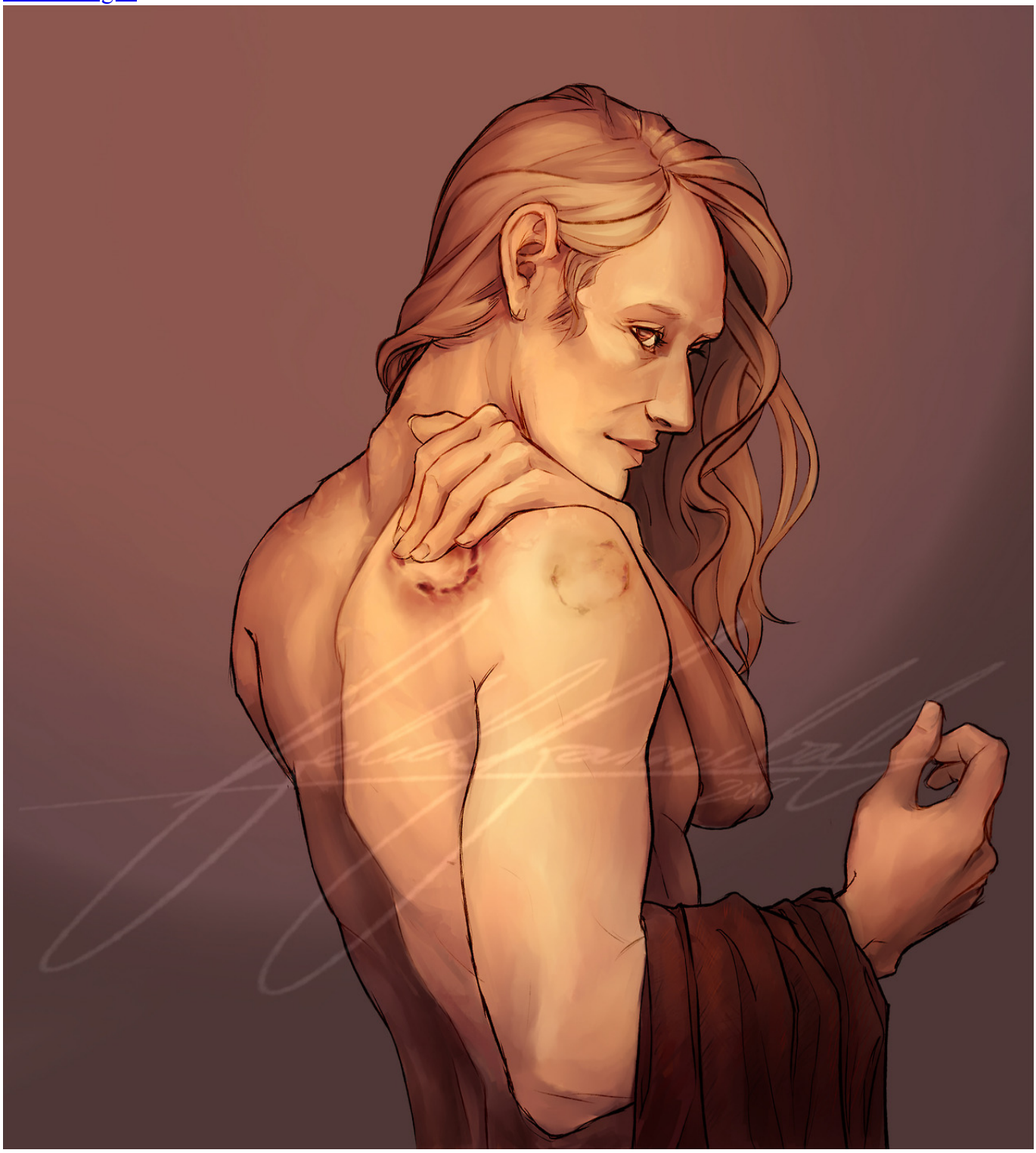
He remembers then the men dressed in black tactical armor swarming into their home, shouting and swinging the barrels of their guns through the air, and he remembers rising from the table and being knocked down almost as soon as he did so, slammed to the ground by a bullet.

And he remembers seeing Will on the floor next to him, on his knees with his hands behind his head, and he remembers extending his own hand towards Will only for one of the SWAT officers to grab Will by the upper arm and yank him to his feet, dragging him out of the kitchen while Will looked back over his shoulder at Hannibal.

Will was speaking, or perhaps simply mouthing the words in the hopes that Hannibal might read his lips, but Hannibal cannot remember what it was he said, and he falls back into the hazy land between sleep and unconsciousness still turning the question over in his mind.

Chapter 2

No new chapter tonight, probably, but I wanted to show off this AMAZING art that I received [felidaefatigue]



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Chapter 3

Will is sitting on the edge of the bed he shared with Hannibal, trying to work up the emotional energy to get on with the packing, when he hears the rattle of a car coming up the gravel drive.

He stands and goes to the window to see who it is, wondering with numb terror if someone has come to arrest him, or maybe to tell him that Hannibal is dead.

That last is so unlikely that it's verging on silly, he knows. It’s entirely possible that Hannibal might be dead, even now, but no one will come to him to deliver the news gently - if he is informed at all before the story hits the press, it will be a phone call.

Will recognizes the black Mercedes-Maybach coming up the drive, though he can’t see the driver through the tinted windows.

He steps away from the window, dithers in the center of the room for a few moments. Will hadn't dared to hope that Margot would come here, but now that he knows she is down there he is desperate to see her. He knows that he needs someone with whom he can talk about events of three evenings earlier and who can help him to figure out what to do next. Too, even the idea of being able to speak with someone else who cares about Hannibal provokes a nearly overwhelming sense of relief. But he is ashamed, too, at the prospect of laying out his failures for her to see.

Will remembers Hannibal looking up at him from where he lay bleeding on the kitchen floor, and he remembers the desperation and bitter suspicion that came into his face when Will let the SWAT officer pull him from the room. *I’ll fix this*, he’d mouthed back at Hannibal, but he doesn’t think that he was understood.

Hannibal’s coat is on the bed where Will left it. That coat was Will’s own originally, but Hannibal took it along when they left the house in Baltimore, concerned that Will might be cold and reasoning that no one would find it too suspicious if Hannibal stole a coat that was big enough to fit him. Somehow, though, over the course of the winter it changed owners.

Will certainly didn’t mind. He knew that Hannibal liked it because it smelled like him, and that knowledge was a source of pleasure for Will. And anyway, it looked better on Hannibal.

The coat smells a bit like Hannibal now, and the night before Will got it out from the closet and took it into bed with him, curling his body around it as he tried to get some sleep.

He hadn't slept any better, but there was still some comfort in it. Will picks the coat up now and puts it on before going downstairs to meet Margot.

Will doesn’t realize how terrible he must look until he sees himself reflected in Margot’s expression. She’s out of her car and heading up the walkway towards the house when he comes outside, but when he begins to hurry towards her Will sees her pull up short.

She looks ready to bolt, and Will freezes. He stands watching her watching him, and though it is a hot day, Will draws the coat more closely around himself.

“I know I look a mess,” he tells her, trying to pitch his voice to sound reassuring - trying to pretend that he hasn’t been coming apart at the seams. “But it’s okay, Margot, really. Will you come inside?”

He can see how frightened she is of him. Will knows that’s fair - that he’s earned it - but it still makes him want to sink down onto the gravel and bawl his eyes out. "Margot, please," he says. "I need some help."

Margot’s brave - or at least intent enough on whatever brought her here that she doesn’t let the fear stop her - and she follows him inside. The weight of admiration and gratitude that he feels for her makes Will’s eyes burn, but he blinks back the tears and leaves her in the kitchen with a glass of sweet tea while he ducks into the downstairs bathroom.

His hair is a greasy rat’s nest of tangled curls, and he runs a comb through it quickly, indifferent to the pain as its teeth catch on the knots. It looks marginally less awful, but fixing his hair doesn’t do a thing for the bruise-bright rings around his eyes, nor for the manic shine that he sees reflected back in those eyes when he looks in the mirror. The bruise on the side of his head has added red to its assortment of gaudy hues. He knows that he smells.

If a patient came to me looking like this, Will thinks, *I would ask them to seriously consider hospitalization.*

He wonders briefly if checking himself into a psych ward might help to sell his story, but dismisses the idea; he needs to stay in the loop and maintain his freedom of movement, if he can. There is so much that needs done.

Will stares into the mirror and draws as much of a mask of calm over himself as he can. Then he goes back into the kitchen.

Keeping his movements slow and as nonthreatening as possible, Will sits across from Margot at the table. “I wasn’t expecting you to come all the way out here,” he says, a kind of apology.

Instead of acknowledging the statement, she says, “How much do they know?”

“I can’t say,” Will answers, and bites his lower lip. “They think he kidnapped me. I’m being treated like a victim, mostly, but they won’t tell me anything. That isn’t a good sign, is it?”

Margot watches him carefully. Her hair is up, pulled back severely, and Will wonders if it hurts her scalp. After a long pause, she says, “I am going to put you in touch with a lawyer.”

“I’ve already got one.”

“This one’s better. I can’t count how many times she got Mason’s charges plead down to a fine or dropped completely.”

“Christ,” Will says, and runs his fingers through his hair. *This is what it’s come down to*, he thinks, and fights the weight of nausea that settles into his belly.

Eventually, he forces himself to look up and meet her eyes. He knows that he can’t afford to refuse. “Okay. Thank you.”

“What happened, Will?”

“We went fishing last week,” he starts, and sees the troubled look that comes into Margot’s eyes at the seeming non sequitur. “I’m explaining from the beginning, alright?” he say, and winces at the annoyance in his voice. Mainly, he is stalling from having to talk about the rest of it. Will looks back at the memory of that trip, rolling it through his head like film.

“There was an old couple there at the lake I’d found. Old marrieds out camping in their RV, you know? I didn’t get any bad vibes from them, and they didn’t seem like a threat. So we just, you know, went ahead and fished.”

It hadn’t felt like a mistake at the time; they couldn’t go the rest of their lives burying every soul who happened to get a glance of Hannibal, and Will was certain that the couple didn’t recognize either of them.

“They must have seen Hannibal’s picture afterwards. I don’t know. Old people watch Unsolved Mysteries, don’t they? Or is that not a thing anymore?” He pauses, blinking slowly, then says again, “I don’t know. I think it was them but I don’t know.”

“Will. What happened to Hannibal?”

“They fucking shot him is what,” he says, and his voice is too loud, nearly shouting, and he knows that the rage that is bubbling up in him will drive Margot away if he lets her see too much of it, and that he will be left here alone again, trying to pack up the pieces and figure out what to do next.

He tries to swallow the anger, but it sits like a lump at the base of his throat. “I’m sorry,” he tells her. “I’m trying. I really am.”

Then he says, “When they broke in, the SWAT team, I got down on the floor right away but Hannibal didn’t. He might - I guess he might have touched his steak knife, Margot, but I don’t think he did. I really don’t think that he did anything other than stand up, you know? They shot him, though, and he fell down under the table.”

Hannibal was trying to pull himself up to lean his back against the table leg, one of his hands clutched over his bleeding middle, and Will tried to go to him, but someone grabbed him roughly by the arm and dragged him to his feet and out of the room.

Will didn’t resist. He mouthed the three words to Hannibal, but didn’t know if Hannibal caught them because a second later three of the men were swarming overtop of Hannibal, wrestling him into cuffs. Will turned away.

He had to.

“I wanted to fight,” he says, insistent. “I wanted to tear into as many of them as I could before they killed me, but I was afraid what would happen to Hannibal if I did.”

He is not sure that he should be telling Margot these things - he can see her drawing away from the violence in his words and his voice and his face - but he feels compelled to explain that it was not cowardice or disloyalty that drove him to roll over and play dead for the bastards in the black body armor.

Will heard Hannibal’s voice echoing inside his head, repeating what he’d told Will on that first miserable night on the run; *You can tell them that I forced you to come along, that I hurt you and*

kidnapped you. You'll be believed, Will - you're good at lying. Everything will go back to normal, and he knew what he had to do.

He surrendered, and he played the victim, and he made no fuse about them taking a pot shot at Hannibal. He knew that there would be no hope for either of them if he didn't sell the act, so he let the fear bleed into his voice as he began to babble, thanking the man who had him by the arm and telling him in jumbled and panicked fragments of sentences how relieved he was to be rescued and how glad he was that this nightmare was over.

The man brought his face very close to Will and bellowed at him to shut up, and Will thought that the person he was pretending to be would be cowed by that so he fell silent as he was dragged through the house. There were at least two dozen SWAT officers inside, and through the windows he could see others moving around.

He was shoved down onto the living room floor. The officer screamed at him to lay down and put his hands over his head, so Will did that.

"I couldn't see Hannibal, but I could see a lot of the rest of the kitchen, and I thought that when they started to take care of him I would see the hustle and bustle of that, or hear them talking about it, you know?

"But no one in my line of sight was doing anything, and I started to think that maybe he was dead, and then I remembered something Hannibal told me one time, about how sometimes cops will delay rendering aide because a dead suspect is less trouble than an injured one.

"I started to get really scared that he was in there bleeding to death, and that he couldn't even put pressure on the wound because of the handcuffs. There were a lot of SWAT officers in the living room with me, and I tried to talk to them. I was *begging* for them to tell me what was happening with Hannibal, but they shouted at me to shut up."

The inside of Will's mouth is very dry. He tries to wet his lips, and it does little good, but Margot sees his need and goes to the sink to get him a glass of water. While her back is to him, Will says, "I got pissed. I shouldn't have but I couldn't help it. It was like there were wasps inside my head and they wouldn't stop stinging until I got up and *did* something.

"I decided I'd had enough and I was going to go in there and help Hannibal myself."

Sitting back at the table and passing the glass to Will, Margot sighs.

"So I started to get up and one of them kicked me across the face with the sole of his boot and knocked me back down, and then there were six fucking guns in my face."

He'd felt like a kid again, pulled under in his father's wake, waiting to see how badly he would hurt his mother and if the old man would hurt him too. "I started to think that if I made trouble it might distract them from seeing to Hannibal, or that they might let Hannibal die to punish me, so I tried to be good." That phrase - "be good" - burned in his brain and tasted like bile in his mouth, another layer of helplessness at the mercy of all these big men with their armor and guns. It was a type of infantile shame, and infuriating.

"But just lying there didn't make any difference," he says. "They still didn't help him."

Nothing else happened until Jack Crawford arrived, except maybe that Hannibal kept on bleeding, just outside of his line of sight.

Will had only met Jack once before, and then briefly. He understood then, as he did while he was lying on the floor with his hands over his head, that Jack was a man who knew killers, and if he cottoned to Will he would stand all the chances of a weasel cornered in the henhouse by the guard dog.

Jack went into the kitchen. He said something either to Hannibal or about him to the officers, but Will couldn't make out the words.

When Jack came back into the living room they let Will up. No one apologized for roughing him up, not even for the kick to the head, which was already starting to bruise in checkered pattern that matched his assailant's boot treads.

He said to Jack, "You are legally obligated to render him aid." Will was not sure if this was really true but it sounded good, he thought.

"He's being taken care of," Jack said. His eyes were shrewd on Will, and full of reflexive suspicion. Jack was, Will understood right away, the sort of man who sincerely believed that a failure to maintain eye contact constituted an admission of guilt. Since Will was, of course, working to sell a very specific story, he worked hard to hold his gaze. "I'm puzzled as to why you're so concerned about his well-being," Jack asked him, cocking his head slightly to the side as he watched Will.

"He's mentally ill," Will said, and tried to make it seem like he was struggling to live up nobility of his words. "He isn't responsible for his own actions and he doesn't deserve to die, regardless of everything he did to me or to anyone else. He needs help."

He will spend the upcoming months attempting to convince the entire world that this is the truth.

"The ambulance came, at last," Will says to Margot now. "And they took him away. They wouldn't let me get close, Margot, but he looked bad. From where I was standing he looked like he was already dead."

Will is, of course, intimately acquainted with what dead looks like. He does not say this, but he knows that Margot is thinking about it.

Margot reaches across the table and rests the tips of her fingers over his own. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get him back," he says. There is no pause, no hesitation. He is full of doubts, but he allows none of them to show.

"How?"

"I don't know," Will says. He slides his eyes to the side and his hands away from Margot's and stands up. "But I am going to figure it out."

Chapter 4

Even after they draw out the ventilator and transfer him from intensive care, it takes Hannibal a long time to take full stock of himself.

The soft restraints that he'd been buckled down with to keep him from pulling out the ventilator are gone now. They're been replaced with two sets of handcuffs, clasped to the rails of the bed, and he sees this as a major improvement as they offer him a slightly better range of movement.

It's a testimonial to how close he came to dying - and, Hannibal supposes, how badly someone back at the Bureau, probably Jack, wants him alive for the trial - that he wasn't flown out directly to some prison medical ward.

The staff here isn't used to dealing with murderers, and they don't know how to treat him. He likes the nurses and doctors who keep their emotional distance, or who even hold him in disdain, better than the anxious ones or the ones who look at him with concern and pity.

He's never left alone with the staff. Even when he is being bathed or when the temporary colostomy bag is being tended to, there is always a cop in the room with them. Hannibal knows how these things work; there is very likely an officer stationed outside of the room at all times.

He turns his head away at these times, fighting to mask his humiliation. His bite marks have been noted and remarked upon multiple times. Being helpless is infuriating.

One of the first things Hannibal asked for, once he was able to ask for anything, was a haircut. They have not said when he will be transferred or to where, but he does not mean to wash up in prison looking soft and girlish. As an ex-cop, he's enough of a target already.

Nonetheless, he hopes that it is prison that he is bound for. He believes that he can survive prison - at least for as long as they allow him to live, as he knows that he may well be a candidate for the death penalty - but the idea of an infinident stay at the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane terrifies him.

Hannibal is asleep when Bev comes into the hospital room. Or else, he is pretending to be.

She flashes her badge at the cop keeping guard and tells him to wait outside, and though she doesn't actually have the authority to send him away he either believes that she does or is eager enough for a break to pretend otherwise.

Moving quietly, Bev sits her bag on the bedside table, then she turns and looks at Hannibal.

Someone's done a hatchet job on his hair, which is shorter than she's ever seen it. His face is very pale, and in sleep she can see the pain in the lines of his face and the tightness of his jaw. She wonders if he is getting enough morphine, or whatever it is they're giving him, if it has occurred to him ask and if such a request would be granted.

"Hannibal," she say, and he comes awake at once at the sound of his name, though there remains something hazy in his eyes. The pain, though, disappears from his face almost at once, shunted

aside and carefully hidden away.

“Bev,” he says, and his voice is coarse. She understands that he has only recently been taken off of a ventilator. “How are you?”

“Better than you, I’d bet,” she tells him, and wonders if that’s a ghost of a smile that she sees flicker across his face, or something else. “You need to tell me who your stylist is so I can stay far away from them. That’s the worst haircut I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“It’s not the the stylist’s fault, really. She was nervous - you know I have that effect on people.”

“Yeah,” Bev says, and sighs. After a pause she asks, “You understand, don’t you, that you are currently under arrest for the murder of Mason Verger?”

Hannibal cuts his eyes away from her. “People keep reminding me. I haven’t forgotten.”

“Good,” Bev says. She considers pitching her voice gentle for the next part, but Hannibal has always responded better to straightforwardness. It is one of the things that she’d liked about him. She keeps her tone matter-of-fact when she tells him, “I’m here to fingerprint you, and to get a hair and DNA sample.”

Hannibal turns his eyes back to her at that, curious. “Surely any half-competent tech could have handled the task. Why did you fly all the way out here?”

Bev has no intention of answering that question. She turns around and busies herself with her kit.

“You were right, you know,” Hannibal says from behind her.

It is perilously close to a confession, and she pauses, knowing that he must know that.

She is here, of course, because Jack and Alana are in agreement that, if Hannibal confesses to anyone, it will be to her. Bev would bet a month’s pay that he knows that, too.

“I know it,” she says, turning around. “Sort of wish I wasn’t.”

“Open your mouth,” Bev tells him, all business. She runs the DNA swab along the inside of his cheek, then seals the swab in its container and the takes out the fingerprint kit. The angle is awkward, with Hannibal handcuffed to the bed, but he is cooperative and they manage neatly enough. She uses a wet nap from the bathroom to clean the ink from his fingertips, and Hannibal thanks her for the courtesy.

He only becomes reluctant when she takes out the tweezers.

“You already have a hair sample,” he tells her, and for the first time she hears a dangerous vein of resentment in his voice.

“You know we need another one.”

“The last one wasn’t entirely above the board, was it?”

Bev’s had some experience at working out how to read him, and when his upper lip twitches briefly she knows what it means. “Don’t get pissy with me, Hannibal. You got yourself into this situation.”

Hannibal blows air out through his nose and turns his head towards the wall.

Bev had already glanced a couple of the bite marks, but when she leans over him she realizes just how many there are. She reaches out to touch one.

“ *Stop* ,” Hannibal says sharply, and shrugs her hand away.

Bev takes a step back, frightened despite herself. Then she tightens her jaw and moves back close to Hannibal, bending over to pluck a few strands of hair from the crown of his head with the tweezers and placing them in a labeled plastic baggy.

“Explain that to me,” Bev says.

“I’m not going to do that,” Hannibal tells her, and maybe the next bit isn’t entirely a brush off, because he sounds sincerely exhausted when he says, “I’m glad that you came, Bev, whatever the reasons, but I’m tired now. Please let me get some rest.”

So she leaves, but it’s hard for her to stop thinking about the maze of scars and still-healing wounds on the back of Hannibal’s shoulder and neck, intersecting each other like contradictions. Bev doesn’t carry that information back to Jack, though. It is, so far as she is concerned, Hannibal’s private business, and she knows that she already has everything they need for a conviction in her samples bag.

Chapter 5

When Hannibal wakes up later, there is a remote control on the end of the table beside him. He is not sure if he has only just noticed it, or if Bev or one of the nurses left it there, intentionally or by mistake, but he maneuvers his chained hand carefully to pick it up.

It doesn't take long to find his own face on the 24-hour news networks. The picture they have is from his FBI ID, and Hannibal is acutely aware of how sad that is, an obvious indicator of a socially barren life.

He isn't interested in what the talking heads have to say about him, but he watches the screen intently for news of Will.

When the report cuts to footage of Will, standing at the podium at a press conference, the flood of emotions that hits Hannibal is hard to untangle. He pushes everything to the side and just watches, taking in as much information as he can.

Will looks ill. He looks worse than he had after he bled himself, shaky and pale, holding tightly to the edges of the podium. There are painful-looking red rings around his eyes, highlighted by black bags beneath them, and a livid bruise in the shape of a partial boot print runs along one side of his face.

None of this is fake , Hannibal realizes, *but he is letting them see just how badly off he is because doing so is somehow useful* . Usually, Will has a wounded animal's mentality; he hides every scrap of weakness that he can. Watching him now, Hannibal wonders if even he ever fully grasped just how haunted and broken Will is.

There must be a vital reason for such a display of vulnerability, and as Hannibal watches the screen Will says, "It's been a terrible ordeal, but I'm safe now." Hannibal recognizes the lie at once, but he remembers perfectly well what a convincing liar Will is. The phrase 'terrible ordeal' would sound over-dramatic and corny coming from anyone else, but Will makes it sound utterly sincere.

Hannibal is glad that he hasn't been arrested, that he seems to be selling whatever alibi he needs to sell to stay that way, and a faint fond smile is beginning to bloom on his lips when Will says, "What I'm committed to now is seeing that Hannibal gets help that he needs. He is extremely ill -"

The cop that guards the outside of his room steps into Hannibal's line of sight and then in front of the television, stopping Hannibal from seeing the screen as Will continues, "and he needs to be in the care of doctors who -"

The TV goes dead, unplugged. Hannibal lets his upper lip pull all the way up into a snarl when the cop turns to face him, and he sees the fear in the man's eyes but it isn't enough to shake the smirk from his own lips. He knows as well as Hannibal does that he has no legal right to curtail Hannibal's access to the news, but they both also know that no one is going to prevent him from engaging in this petty display of power.

Hannibal turns his eyes away from the cop and turns his attention to this new memory of Will, going over every facet of it, trying to understand.

He is distressed by Will's claim that he is ill. Hannibal knows perfectly well that he is, and in more ways than one, but he believes himself to be morally cognizant of the significance of his own actions, and he wonders with sudden fear if he might be wrong about this, if he is crazier than he knows.

No , he tells himself. *It's an angle. Will is trying to sell something* .

He is trying, obviously, to convince the world that Hannibal is too ill to be held responsible, and is laying the groundwork for an insanity plea. That confuses and frightens Hannibal. *I told him I don't want to end up in the BHCI,* he thinks. *Will knows that* .

He wonders suddenly if Will is trying to cast him down into the same dark pit that they threw Dolarhyde into, into a place where he will be kept too drugged and isolated to ever publicly question Will's innocence, and a lump of aching dread settles onto his wounded gut. If they take him to the BHCI, Hannibal knows, he will never see the sun again.

"There's a reason for it," Hannibal tells himself out loud, but there is no comfort in the words and the terror that is on him now is unlike anything that he has felt since those endless claustrophobic weeks trapped under the snow - the fear that he's been taken in, tricked, abandoned.

Fear that he has been a fool, trusting so completely in the love and dedication of a man who he knows to be a consummate manipulator.

He could have killed me before we ever left Baltimore and walked away looking cleaner than he can ever hope to seem now , Hannibal reminds himself, but he wonders then if Will simply has buyer's remorse - if he has proven a disappointment, too much one thing or not enough of another, and not worth the price Will paid - and if Will is trying to trade him in for a shot at getting his old life back.

But he remembers the ring, which has been taken from him, and the shy way that Will looked up at him when he held it out to Hannibal, and the way that Will's love shown so brightly in his eyes, mingled with the fear that Hannibal might, even still, reject him and all of his love.

Hannibal remembers, too, the worshipful way that Will touched him later that night, as though he were some priceless piece of art that might be sullied by even the slightest brush of his fingers, but that Will could not resist exploring inch by inch with his hands. There had been such a tenderness in Will that Hannibal had not needed to feel the bite of Will's teeth to know that what Will felt for him was overwhelmingly powerful and utterly sincere.

"He loves me," Hannibal says, but very softly, in case anyone should overhear him. "There is a reason he is doing this."

He's not as certain as he wants to be, but it's something to hold tight.

Chapter 6

“We control the narrative,” Kincaid says, and Will looks up from his bourbon to watch the lawyer’s face as she elaborates on the point. “Not the media, not the FBI, not the prosecutor’s office and not Lecter. We do that by staying out in front of the story - we keep you on the front page and we tell people what to think about every new development before they even hear about it.”

They are in the kitchen of Will’s hotel suite, Kincaid and Margot and Will, and through the window downtown Seattle gleams, glass and chrome lit up brightly against the night. It makes Will’s eyes tired.

“I thought I handled myself well enough this afternoon,” he says. The press conference had been a whirlwind, bright lights and shouting voices ringing Will in on three sides, and in the aftermath he has not been able to shake a dazed sense of exhaustion. He has allowed that to show, all through this late night strategy meeting. Kincaid is easier to manage if she believes that she is managing Will.

“You hit most of the important notes,” Kincaid agrees - too easily, Will thinks. He is certain that he is being condescended to, but that doesn’t really matter. “You’ve established yourself as an attractive victim. People are going to be invested in the tragedy and the drama of what happened to you. From here, the important thing is that we keep pushing the idea that your only mistake was having heart that was too big for your own good.”

Will hates the way that Kincaid talks. She sounds like a villain to him, like an enabler of every type of privileged and calloused social malignancy that he has always feared being a part of. The waves of wounded disdain coming off of Margot, who is sitting with careful impassivity beside Will, does nothing to calm his own distaste for the lawyer.

He asks carefully, “Do you think they accepted what I said about Hannibal?”

“Sell it harder next time. The story only works if he’s crazy enough that you didn’t just pity him. The public needs to understand that you were too terrified of what he might do to try to run. We need to start to breach the idea that you’re more frightened of him than you’ve let on so far.”

Will already knows this, but behaving as though Hannibal scares him has been the part of this masquerade that he has had the most trouble with. He thinks that it is probably because there are many ways in which he sincerely feels and has felt fearful in regard to Hannibal, but that none of these anxieties - that he has been bad for Hannibal or has corrupted him, that Hannibal’s affection for him is underpinned by a belief that he deserves nothing better than Will, that he will not be able to save Hannibal from this current crisis and even if he does that Hannibal will resent the methods through which Will does so and will hate him - map well with the picture of Hannibal that they have been trying to paint.

“I can do that,” he tells her.

“We’re in a good position,” Kincaid tells him. “You’re a relatively young, rich, white male professional with an established history of community involvement and charitable contributions. You are not a good target to start with, and the more work we do to establish you as a well-intentioned victim the less appealing going after your head is going to look to the feds.

“They want this to go away. Lecter is an embarrassment, and the fact that he was cleared to be an agent is going to sink a lot of careers. They want this over with, as quickly as possible, and if your story helps to bury him in some nuthouse then that’s all the better.”

Will nods, looking down into his drink. He tries to look thoughtful instead of disgusted with himself and the lawyer.

When Kincaid has gone, Margot drains her own drink and says, with a sort of wonderment that is only slightly edged by horror, “You’ve really got her believing that this entire thing is her own plan.”

Will takes her glass from her then picks up his own and carries them to the counter.

“She reminds me of one of those hyper-evolved bottom feeders that live on the ocean floor,” he says, his back to Margot. “All mouth and strange fleshy protuberances, but better suited for the environment they hunt in than any other living thing.”

He makes Margot another drink and then pours himself another double of the bourbon. “But you were right about my needing her. I can spin a convincing story - or at least, I hope that I can - but I'd have had no idea how to wrangle the press the way she’s managed to do.”

Will sits back down at the table and pushes Margot’s glass towards her. She wraps her fingers around it but doesn’t drink.

Will meets her eyes. “I want to thank you for being here. I know it’s not easy for you to be around someone who spent so much time managing Mason’s dirty laundry.”

“I’m used to worse.”

Will is fairly certain that she isn’t referring to him, but he doesn’t quite dare to ask. “I’d hoped,” he says quietly, “that with Mason dead you wouldn’t have to deal with this sort of shit anymore. I’m sorry for this.”

When Margot doesn’t answer, he picks up on an older conversation thread. “It’s easy to get Kincaid to feel that she’s the puppet master here because I laid the story out in such a way as to make her want to pull the strings that I want her to pull - the ones that will sell the story that we need to sell to help Hannibal.”

This is the story:

That Will knew from his time as Hannibal’s psychiatrist that Hannibal was somewhat unbalanced and prone towards obsessive behavior before they began to date, but that Will believed that he could help to stabilize him. That he had not realized until it was too late, just how ill Hannibal really was.

That when Hannibal realized that Margot - Will’s good friend - was being threatened and abused by her brother, a man that Will made no secret about despising, he decided to kill Mason for the sake of Margot and her son, as well as to please Will.

That when suspicion for the murder turned to Hannibal he tried to force Will to go into hiding with him him, and when he refused Hannibal attacked Will and kidnapped him, and that Will was so traumatized by the attack and so frightened of what Hannibal might do to Will or to himself if Will attempted escape that he had not dared to flee.

The scars that the judge gave Will are not documented in any of his medical records. Only Cordell could put the lie to the claim that Hannibal gave them to Will, and he is well in Margot's pocket.

"It helps, I suppose, that so little of the overall narrative is really a lie," Margot says, swirling her drink.

Will nods. "Hannibal attacked Mason because he caught him threatening me with that ugly little pen knife of his. I think he knew that Mason wasn't really a threat to me, but it offended him.

"But even before he saw that, Hannibal was primed to want to hurt him, and that had a lot to do with you and the boy. I haven't been carrying tales, Margot, I swear, but he's perceptive and he could see the way that I felt about Mason - and your feelings too, obviously. That carried him a lot further than he would have let himself go otherwise."

"What took him the rest of the way?"

Will knows she is thinking about all of the suffering Hannibal drew out of Mason, about how long he made the thing last.

He thinks about it for a long time before he answers. "Artistry," Will says at last, opting for the simple truth.

Margot doesn't touch her drink, but watching her working to understand what Will has said and the note of awe that came into his voice when he said it provokes in Will the sincere belief that he is not drunk enough for any of this.

Letting Margot really see him hasn't been quite as difficult as coming to terms with the fact that Hannibal tumbled to intimate knowledge which Will had never intended to disclose, and he supposes that part of that is that he doesn't feel the situation to be entirely outside of his control because he knows that there are ways in which he can still frighten Margot away, but that does not mean that it has been easy.

He drains his glass and gets up for a refill.

"You've been drinking more than you should be," Margot tells him, and he hates how careful her voice is.

"I am a high functioning alcoholic, Margot, and I know that you've known me long enough to know that," he says wearily. "Don't worry about it - I'll manage things just fine anyway."

He sways when he turns back to the table, though, and frowns when he sees Margot stand up and take her purse from under the table.

"I'll walk you back to your rooms," Will offers. He has been wondering, for some hours now, if Thomas might be waiting with his nanny in Margot's suite, though he knows better than to ask.

“No, Will. It's fine,” Margot says. There’s some relief in the fact that she makes no effort to force a smile - it tells Will that she’s not so scared that she feels a need to pacify him - but he knows when she pauses on the way out to put a chaste kiss on his cheek that she has to dare herself to do it. “Get some sleep.”

Everything is harder once Will is alone, though, and he sits up for a long time, drinking and wondering where Hannibal is and if he’s alright.

“He’ll think I’ve betrayed him,” Will says, and breathing the words out into the world raises gooseflesh onto Will’s skin because he is not, after all, entirely sure that he hasn’t done just that.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal wakes with the scent of Freddie Lounds' shampoo burning in his nose.

It is not, in of itself, a particularly bad smell, but the associations it provokes are utterly noxious.

Hannibal does not open his eyes. He keeps the rhythm of his own breathing slow and steady as he tracks her by scent and sound as she moves through the room.

Freddie stops at the side of his bed, and after a studied pause in which Hannibal is sure she is watching him to make certain that he really is asleep, he feels her lift the sheet that covers his legs carefully and fold it back. She pulls up his hospital gown next, inch by creeping inch, careful to avoid catching it on the temporary colostomy bag.

That's supposed to go later this week, and even as Hannibal is processing the way in which she has caused him to be exposed he is thinking how lucky it is for Freddie, that she has been able to sneak her way in here in time to get a really interesting picture.

Freddie takes a step back. Hannibal can feel the faint breeze from the air circulation system on his genitals. The camera makes a faint click when Freddie snaps the picture. She takes two more, then she circles around the edge of the bed to get another angle.

Her shoes click faintly on the linoleum as she moves to the head of the bed. Flat heels, Hannibal notes - sensible, and convenient in case she should need to make a hasty retreat.

Freddie begins to undo the snap buttons that run from the collar of gown and down the right sleeve. She folds back the top of the gown, exposing his shoulder and much of his neck, and Hannibal hears the smallest of gasps before the click of the camera comes again.

Hannibal waits. The monitors to which he is connected show no spike in his pulse rate or his blood pressure. He has never felt more calm.

There is a small sound as Freddie lets the camera fall back against her chest, and then Hannibal feels a strand of her hair brush his ear as she leans in to get a closer look at the scars, and he lunges upwards and catches her cheek between his teeth.

Hannibal bites down as hard as he can and then wrenches his head backwards, and a chunk of skin and meat tears free and comes away between his teeth, and astonishingly Freddie neither screams nor bolts.

She staggers back a few steps - an unnecessary precaution given that Hannibal is still chained to the bed - and he sees the way she holds her face in a rictus of pain and fear, one hand cupped gingerly over her wounded cheek as blood wells between her fingers, and the way her watering eyes become huge with shock, but then with her free hand she raises her camera and begins to snap more pictures. He can imagine how he will look in those pictures, bloody-mouthed and utterly insane, and because it can be no worse he lets his upper lip pull into a snarl that shows his reddened teeth and the piece of flesh between them.

A sound comes out of Freddie's throat but she doesn't stop clicking the shutter, and there is a red hot moment of madness in which Hannibal considers swallowing the chunk of meat. Then he spits it into his palm and sits it, carefully and with a great deal of distaste, on the edge of his barely-touched lunch tray.

Hannibal lays back in the bed and snaps the blanket back over his lower-half with a sharp, angry gesture. He closes his eyes against the ensuing turmoil, ignoring it all.

His imagination has always been sharp; when he focuses, it is almost as though he and Will are together again.

When one of the doctors comes to retrieve the little chunk of flesh - with the ambition of reattaching it, Hannibal supposes - the cop that was supposed to be guarding his door is with her. Hannibal knows him by the scent of gun oil, leather and cheap beer. He opens his eyes and turns his head to look at the officer.

"Are you so incompetent that you can't manage a task that any rent-a-cop could handle," Hannibal wonders out loud, "or did you take a bribe to let her in there?"

The cop looks back at him impassively, sensitive to the doctor's presence. Hannibal would like to cost the officer his job, in the very least, but he knows how little leverage he actually has.

It's only after they've left him alone that Hannibal begins to worry that his actions might have somehow fouled Will's plan.

Hannibal closes his eyes and wanders in his head back to the place where he left Will.

He's greeted with a wide grin and a rollicking laughter, and when they draw close to one another Will hauls him in for long kiss. When their lips meet, Hannibal realizes that here at least, inside of his mind, he still has Freddie Lounds' blood around his mouth and between his teeth.

His mouth smears Will's red, and when he pulls away he sees Will's tongue dart out to lick his own lips. "Good for you," Will says, viciously triumphant in his not entirely satisfied satisfaction on Hannibal's behalf. "You had every goddamn right. She had that and more coming and you were absolutely right."

Hannibal understands perfectly well that this is not really Will - that it is a construct of the man that his imagination has created, based around Hannibal's understanding of who Will is and his never entirely perfect predictions of what he might say or do in any given situation - but there is little doubt in his mind that this is exactly what Will would say to him now, were they really together.

He tries to push down his own sense of satisfaction, so that this imaginary Will might become somber as well. "I am worried about the repercussions of this," he tells Will.

It is not really Will - even the imaginary Will - that answers him, because Hannibal still lacks a clear idea of what Will's game plan is. But Hannibal finds he can tease out the problem better if he filters it through this other, Will-like facet of himself.

"They need to think that you're crazy," he says, and Hannibal nods, though he still doesn't understand why. "This will help with that," Will tells him, a measured understatement behind a sheepish smile. "But Hannibal… you'll look like you're a danger to the staff now, and that isn't good. They'll want you gone fast."

And sure enough, within days of the colostomy reversal surgery, he is transferred to the medical ward at the Maryland State Penitentiary.

Chapter End Notes

Aw Freddie, I do love you, but sometimes there are consequences for our actions...

lays down for a long time

I sort of just stumbled into the idea that I alleviate a ~little~ of this suffering by expanding on AU Hannibal's unpolished version of his memory palace, and the reflection of Will that dwells there in his imagination...

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will hears his own voice speaking from the radio, but only distantly. He sits slouched on the edge of the porch, his hands clasped between his knees, wandering in his head.

As though from far away he hears himself say, “Obviously, I can’t condone what Hannibal did to Ms. Lounds. The photographs are… terrifying. Especially in the context of my own experience of the ways in which Hannibal can turn suddenly violent.

“But,” he goes on, and his own voice is like the buzzing of a mosquito behind Will’s ear as he traces his way back through the trails that he and Hannibal walked together. “But. There is a larger context to what happened. Freddie Lounds has spent half a decade relentlessly harassing Hannibal - a fact that has had an extremely negative impact on his mental health, I might add. They say that a kicked dog will bite, and unfortunately what happen here is an all too literal example of that fact.”

The uproar this provoked from the press conference audience, coming distorted and fuzzy through the speakers, is nearly enough to pull Will back into reality. “The fact of the matter is that it was not safe for Ms. Lounds to be in that room, and she should not have entered that room - it was in fact unlawful for her to be there, and I eagerly await news that the Seattle PD will charging her with trespassing and interference with a criminal investigation. And - and, I will add - the taking and distribution of nude photographs without the consent of the subject is, in fact, sexual assault under the law…”

Frustratingly, the audio cuts off there, before Will reiterates the importance of getting Hannibal psychological help. The show host and his guests cut in to discuss what was said at the press conference, and their voices recede from Will’s mind, drown out by the roar of falling water.

Hannibal is, Will feels certain, only a step or two behind him. He can hear his footfalls, light for a man of his size but not quite as silent in the underbrush as Will’s own.

He does not, however, dare to look back.

They walk together for a while, Hannibal always just beyond the corner of Will’s eye, and at last they come to the waterfall that they visited at least a dozen times during their stay in the safehouse. They had picnicked here, spreading a blanket out on the water’s edge, just outside of the reach of the spray.

It’s not an old memory, but it has a bitter note of nostalgia. Something good gone forever.

Approaching the rocky ledge at the edge of the waterfall now, Will is badly worried that Hannibal hasn’t been eating. Hannibal needs to be in control of what goes into his body or the old anxieties come flooding back; hospital food will not agree with him, and the prison fare will be even worse.

“Freddie,” Will says darkly, and chucks a riverstone at the falling water. “I’d like to sue her into the ground.” He pauses, seething, and the roaring of the water is like the roaring in his head. “Shit. I’d like to set her on fire. All that red hair going up in flames with a *thoomp* .”

Will can see himself reflected in the gleaming surface of the water, but not Hannibal. When they came here for real Hannibal's reflection was there beside his own, and it seems singularly cruel of his imagination that it is not there now.

"You're too angry, Will," Hannibal's voice cautions him, nonetheless. "Don't let them see that."

"My lawyer said the same thing," Will grumbles, and throws another rock at the wall of water. "At least I know where they'll be holding you, not that I can get to you there." And he reminds himself, for the thousandth time since news of Hannibal's impending transfer to the Maryland State Penitentiary hit the press, that it meant nothing - that it is usual, far more often than not, for defendants who had entered insanity pleas to be held in prison prior to trial, and that anyway Hannibal's case had not even reached that point yet.

He knows that if he turns around to look that Hannibal will disappear, but he stares long and hard at the waterfall, trying to will Hannibal's reflection to manifest itself there. Nothing happens.

At last, desperate to be understood though he knows that what he tells this shade will work no difference on the real world, Will says, "Listen to me very closely - after the trial, it has to be the BSHCI. I can help you - I can try my damndest, at least - if it's the BSHCI, but if it's anywhere else we have no chance. Do you understand?"

There comes no answer this time.

After a while, he leaves the memory behind and goes back to work.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter one, but the next ought to be very long and I wanted to give yall something now, since it will be a few days until I am able to update again.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal's suit doesn't fit properly.

He studies himself in the mirror that hangs above the bathroom sink. The suit is his own, brought from his home to the prison by his lawyer, and when Hannibal bought it the thing had been an extravagance, tailored specifically for his frame. Now it hangs from him like it's still on the rack, shapeless.

He sighs at his own reflection, and the eyes that look back at him are so deeply set in his gaunt face that he can hardly see them for the shadows.

Nearly six months have passed since he was transferred to Maryland State, and while Hannibal is perfectly aware that he'd been dropping weight, it's only now, as he prepares himself for the first day of his trial, that he realizes exactly how bad it's gotten.

The nice thing, Hannibal tries to tell himself during that first night in the prison medical ward, is that at least he isn't handcuffed to the bed anymore.

There are three other inmates in the ward with him, and the one in the bed furthest from Hannibal will not stop crying.

He waits, more or less patiently, for something to be done about this; the other inmates might be frustrated with the noise, but Hannibal has no expectations of sleep and nowhere else to be in the morning.

It is easy, too, for him to make himself callous to the noise. The exhausted, pained weeping with its periods of sniffling stillness broken by ragged breathing and the occasional bitten-back sob or groan wash over him like elevator music, unremarkable background noise, but when the night orderly sticks his head in the door and then leaves again without so much as a glance at the weeping man, Hannibal becomes offended.

It is not, at least at first impulse, a question of kindness or cruelty for Hannibal, but of a failure on the part of the orderly to do his job that outrages him. But as the crying goes on and on, Hannibal begins to wonder what Will might do in this situation.

He would drag the orderly back in here by the ear, and damn the consequences, Hannibal thinks, and smiles up at the ceiling. But Hannibal's incision is still healing, and he is not keen on taking a beating just yet.

Instead, he goes with what he imagines would be Will's second choice; he gets out of bed and goes to see if he can help.

Hannibal thinks that it would be good to crouch at the bedside, but bending still provokes a great deal of pain (and he has been informed that he will no longer be receiving opiates) so he leans over

the man in the bed instead, and sees what he had already inferred from the sound of the crying, which is that he's hardly a man at all; pain has a way of warping features, but Hannibal would be surprised to learn that he's any older than twenty.

Now that he is close he notes also that the smell, which had been faint but troublesome from the other side of the room, is very strong here.

The kid looks up at him, his olive face wet with sweat and his dark hair plastered against his skin in tight ringlets, and Hannibal sees the fear in him. He expects to be treated ugly, to be told to shut up and threatened or worse, and there is in Hannibal an impulse to confound those expectations, especially when he sees the way that the other inmate fights to set his face against the anticipated attack.

Hannibal makes his own face placid and reassuring. "I just got here," he tells the kid. "A SWAT team shot me. I saw my own large intestines; the experience was not aesthetically pleasing."

He sees the astonishment in kid's face, the turning away from pain long enough to let out a shaky laugh, and Hannibal feels powerful and confident in that power. And feels, for the first time since he awoke in the hospital, as though he really being seen by someone else.

"I feel bad about being such baby, in that case. All I've got is a spider bite."

"Sometimes you have to let your body cry," Hannibal says, but he is troubled. The kid's hand rests, swollen, on top of his chest. Even through the layered bandages the smell is horrific. He knows, but he asks the question anyway: "Was the spider a brown recluse?"

"That's what it looked like to me," he says. Then he adds, "I'm Caleb."

"Hannibal."

"Really?"

"Really," Hannibal says, dryly. He gestures at Caleb's hand. "Would it be alright if I looked at that?"

There is hesitation. "Can you do anything about it?"

"I can change the dressing," he says. There's a supply cabinet under the sink, and Hannibal knows without checking that it will be locked, but at least there is fresh gaze on the counter. "And check for infection."

Caleb eyes cut away from him at that, but Hannibal still catches a glimpse of the dread there. He might not have Hannibal's sense of smell, but he isn't stupid.

Hannibal suspects that he has been afraid to look, and now he shifts his body to block as much of Caleb's view of the hand before he begins to unroll the bandages. His skin is clammy and much too hot. Caleb hisses through his teeth and clenches the edge of the mattress with his good hand, and Hannibal tightens his grip on his wrist to keep Caleb from breaking away.

Hannibal anticipated that it would be bad, but once the wound is uncovered he sees that it's much worse than he'd expected.

He hears the night orderly's footsteps in the hallway and looks up.

“Get back in your bed,” the orderly says, and when Hannibal ignores the command he takes a few steps into the room, which is at least an improvement to walking right by.

“This wound is necrotic,” Hannibal says, and the blank look that the man gives him makes Hannibal wonder for the first time in years if there is some severe flaw in his English.

Below him, Caleb makes a small and fearful noise, dispelling Hannibal’s doubts that he has failed to use the correct word. “*Necrotic*,” he says again, his anger spiking. “Gangrene.”

If they’d sent me here right after I was shot I’d be dead now, Hannibal thinks, with an infuriated sort of wonder.

“Go back to your bed,” the orderly says again, stepping further into the ward. It is extremely difficult to break a person’s neck with your bare hands, but this man has a very long and thin neck, and Hannibal believes that he could manage it.

Instead, he smiles a smile that is just a hair away from an open threat and goes back to his bed, nursing the feeling of gratification that came with the unease that his smile provoked in the orderly face.

The kid’s injury is still uncovered, so the orderly has little choice but to pay attention to him now. Hannibal sits up in his bed, back against the wall and hands folded just above his wounded abdomen, and keeps smiling the dangerous smile while he watches him work.

Caleb is watching Hannibal, too, short glances whenever his fear allows him to look away from the orderly and what he is doing, and the other inmates are watching, too. They are silent, but Hannibal has a sense that this is the best entertainment that they’ve enjoyed in a long time. Hannibal doesn't pretend not to enjoy the attention.

It hurts Caleb when the orderly starts to rewrap his hand, and Hannibal thinks again of what Will might do, were his options as limited as Hannibal’s own, and he takes the sharp edges out of his expression and holds Caleb’s gaze, trying to impart a sense of sympathy.

The orderly takes Caleb’s temperature and leaves again, and nothing else happens until morning, but shortly before breakfast a doctor comes in and looks at him, and a couple of hours after that he is taken away in a stretcher.

When breakfast comes, Hannibal looks down at his tray and starts to understand just how much trouble he can expect to have going forward, but he doesn’t count on just how much worse lunch will be.

It doesn’t take long for Hannibal to see how easy it might be for him to fit in at the prison, among these guarded men, most of whom have very little in common with himself or Will and their deeply embedded yen for violence.

He tries to keep his distance after that first night, concerned that he might undermine his insanity plea if he seems too socially competent, but before long people start to gravitate towards him. It begins even before news of his pending trial starts to spread, but once it is common knowledge that he is being held for the torture killing of a known pedophile, more inmates find their way to his table during meals and his general vicinity during recreational periods.

It doesn't take long for Hannibal to recognize that he is attracting a specific type of inmate. They are young, all of the men who place themselves at the edge of his orbit, and they seem to bring with them the same silent and carefully guarded aspiration that he might be looked to to help to keep them safe that Hannibal saw in some of the smaller orphans that he helped to look after, back when he was barely a child himself.

He is distantly worried, for a while, that one of them might try to offer him sex, but little seems to be expected of him other than that that he continue to look quietly dangerous and that he allow them to remain close while he does so. Sometimes they give him an orange or an apple, sitting the fruit wordlessly on his tray and walking on, but these come less with the sense of some sort of payment than as quietly concerned gifts; he knows that the way he picks at his meals has been noticed, even if it is not remarked upon.

Only rarely does anyone attempt to start a conversation with him, and on these occasions Hannibal is polite but reticent. He sees how slowly things move here, how careful people are to hold themselves apart from others, the wary way in which newcomers are observed and vetted at length prior to even the most basic overtures of friendship.

Caleb, it seems, is a rare exception.

Weeks after Hannibal joins the general population, he reappears in the lunch line behind Hannibal. He's hardly the picture of health himself, but the first thing Caleb says to him is, "You look awful."

Hannibal decides not to remark on the state of the kid's left hand, which is short two fingers and a significant portion of the palm. They sit down at an empty table, and almost at once Hannibal's small band begins to slowly drift towards him.

"I can't eat the meat," Hannibal tells him.

Thet truthis that he can eat barely any of it. The dry white bread and greasy margarine stick in his throat like cardboard, and the canned vegetables have a metallic undertaste that makes his palate burn, and occasional wilted salad is entirely impossible. But it's the meat - reconstituted ground beef mixed with pasta or more canned vegetables and the strange plastic-like slices of reddish-pink 'baloney' - that carries him past disgust and into the territory of dread.

"Are you Jewish?" Caleb asks him, and Hannibal shakes his head.

"I just can't eat it."

"Too bad. You can get signed up for the vegetarian meals, though, it just takes a while. I'll show you how."

"I filed the day after I got here," Hannibal says. "It hasn't been processed yet."

"Do you have commissary?"

Hannibal does, but he opts not to explain that the cheap chocolate and potato chips and instant noodles are hardly any easier for him to stomach. He lapses into silence, and Caleb takes the hint.

Things get a little better once he has been approved for the vegetarian meals - the food is no less disgusting, but he can be fairly certain that it has not come into contact with the mystery meat that so worries and nauseates him - but he knows that he is still losing ground.

He knows that this is not sustainable, but he tells himself that if he seems physically ill when he comes before the jury that this might reinforce Will's argument that he is mentally sick as well.

When he is fully healed, Hannibal starts to look for fights.

His first thought is to establish a history of sudden and unpredictable violence, but after some consideration it occurs to him that it will better serve Will's narrative if he seems to be attacking people who he perceives as either threats to his friends or morally repugnant, so for his first target he goes after a man who is troubling Caleb.

Hannibal is confident of his ability to manage solitary confinement, but the first time they bring him the nutraloaf he worries that he's made a serious mistake.

It is easier, though, to visit with Will when he is alone, and looking down at the blended mass of yesterday's leftovers that rests on his tray, Hannibal goes into the space inside his head to find him, and Will encourages and cajoles him until he has eaten at least something.

He's in segregation for a month after that first fight, and he is back among the general population for less two days before he finds a member of the Aryan Brotherhood on whom to use his fists. Hannibal is careful not to kill the man, as much as he would like to; he has no intention of catching a new murder charge, and he is pleased that his ability to exercise control in this regard seems to have returned.

After that, he spends the rest of the intervening time before his trial in solitary, leaving only for showers and weekly meetings with his new psychologist, and the space inside his head grows in breadth and in detail while he is there, coming to encompass many happier times and places. The version of Will that lives in his imagination is predictable and easily bid in a way that the true Will has never been, and is by no means as satisfying as the real flesh and blood thing, but it is better than loneliness.

Now, the door to the bathroom swings open and Hannibal sees his lawyer reflected in the mirror.

Hannibal turns. He has thought it important to keep the idea that he really is dangerously insane in the fore of the man's mind - all the better to make his arguments on Hannibal's behalf convincing - and he bleeds subtle menace into the way he holds himself as the lawyer comes closer.

"Redo your tie - the windsor knot looks pretentious," he tells Hannibal, but Hannibal ignores him. "You shouldn't look so well put together," he insists, and when he touches Hannibal's clothing, trying to make it seem more ruffled, Hannibal allows his upper lip to pull up into a snarl.

The lawyer backs off.

"I want you to get me something that fits for tomorrow," Hannibal tells him.

"Sure. You ready?"

Hannibal nods.

When the lawyer turns away, he takes a deep breath and readies himself to face Will.

Chapter End Notes

This will probably be the next one for a week or so because

A.) I have a lot of thesis work to do,
B.) The next couple chapters are going to be very complex/long probably,
C.) Bottom!Hannibal day is coming up on the 9th (anyone have
requests? XD) and I want to have a go at contributing to that collection,

but I am really glad to have finished this one, and hope people like it though it's sort of dry.

Back when I did collaborative work designing educational programming with inmates at the local prison, one of my friends was bitten by a brown recluse and had a similar experience as described above, except that he got bitten in the leg and lost a big chunk of muscle instead of part of a hand.

Chapter 10

Margot guides Will into the courtroom and down onto one of the benches in the gallery.

Months ago, they decided that Margot would play the role of the strong one - that she could do so most convincingly and most sympathetically - and so far she has pulled it off flawlessly. She is all straight spine and impenetrable aristocratic reserve, the total image softened by the way that she shepherds Will with measured, attentive care.

But Will knows how afraid she is, and how vulnerable, and he hates that she is carrying so much weight for him and for Hannibal.

They sit and wait for them to bring Hannibal in. Will's hands twist and jitter in his lap, and he does not try to still them. He knows that he is being watched.

Will knew that there was really no preparing for that first sight of Hannibal after so many months apart, no matter how many hundreds of times he rehearsed it inside of his head, but it still hits him like a gut punch.

He sees Hannibal in profile, walking down the aisle with chains on his wrists and ankles, and the jut of his cheekbone and the heaviness of his orbital ridge are stark in his gaunt face, and then Hannibal's head turns towards Will and their eyes meet and Will sees that Hannibal is as shocked by the sight of him as he is by Hannibal.

Will lets that shock roll over him, puts into his face all of his horror at seeing Hannibal in chains with his butchered prison haircut and the suit that doesn't fit his rawboned frame, and knows that his expression will be read by the people watching as fear of Hannibal rather than for him.

Hannibal pauses just long enough to fall out of step from the officer who is guiding him, and he stumbles when the man shoves him forward. It is such a small thing, hardly noticed by anyone else, but for Will - who is so well acquainted with Hannibal's nearly preternatural grace and speed - it is terrifying.

He's sick, Will thinks, with a sudden certainty. *It isn't just that he isn't eating enough. There's something wrong with him.*

Hannibal sits at the table near the front of the courtroom, his back to the gallery, and his lawyer slides in beside him. The man masks it well, but Will sees in the way the man edges his chair towards the end of the table and thus further away from Hannibal, the fear that he has of Hannibal. Will wonders if Hannibal has been deliberate in his encouragement of that fear, and if it will benefit the plan.

Will watches the back of Hannibal's head as the opening arguments commence. He sits quietly and very straight at the desk. Will can see the sharp points of his elbows and knows exactly how his hands will be folded neatly together on the table.

The defense opens. "We are not contesting the charges," Hannibal's lawyer says, and Will looks past Hannibal to track the man with his eyes. Kincaid has briefed him on the lawyer, whose name is Murphy, and Will wonders now what criteria Hannibal used in selecting him.

“Hannibal is responsible for the death of Mason Verger,” he says, and the solemnity with which he speaks seems so sincere that it even passes Will’s bullshit reader. “He has also caused Dr. Graham a nearly unfathomable amount of pain and emotional distress.”

Murphy looks up towards Will and meets his eye, and in the same instant Will feels the everyone else in the courtroom to look at him, measuring his response. Will squirms uncomfortably on the bench and bites his lip, and Margot folds her hand over his.

Only Hannibal does not turn to look.

“However,” Murphy goes on, “we will demonstrate that Hannibal was not, at the time of these events, fully cognizant of the impact of his actions, nor is he fully able to comprehend them now. We will show as well that he was driven by an irresistible impulses - first to remove what he considered to be a threat to others and later to maintain a relationship that he viewed as his only social lifeline. Insofar as he had the cognitive and emotional ability to understand why his actions were wrong, he lack the volition to be able to control his behavior.”

Will watches the back of Hannibal’s head and wonders how he feels about what the lawyer is saying about him. And he thinks, *thank god Maryland includes volitional impairment in its guidelines for an insanity defense*.

It’s been a decade and a half since Will has last been in a courtroom. That was in Atlanta, less than a year after he began working, and he had stood in front of the parole board and the judge during Matthew Brown’s hearing, though at the time that had not been his name, and assured them that he was confident that Matthew would not reoffend.

Will said this not because he really believed it, but because it was intolerable to him for that bright boy to remain trapped in the vast dungeon that was Central State Hospital. Matthew, incorrigible as he was, took less than two weeks to break his parole, and it had been a real trick making him disappear before he was taken into custody again.

Will had been fast on his feet, learning as he went many of the dodges that would later help himself and Hannibal to stay free for as long as they did, and when he sent Matthew into hiding with a new identity and a clean record the boy at least had the sense to stay off the radar and out of jail.

Matthew was not easy to scare - that was a large part of his problem - but Will tried to scare him, just before he went out on the road. He tried to drive home just how much Will was risking for him and how much trouble they would both be in if Matthew fucked up the chance he was being given, and Matthew smirked at him with that sideways grin and said, “What have you got hidden away, Doc G?” and Will found himself caught between pleasure at how irrepressible the little smartass was, despite the years in the asylum, and a desire to throttle him.

Will has missed Matthew, and he feels the edges of a smile attempting to form on his face at the memory, but he pushes it away and forces himself to focus on what’s happening at the front of the courtroom.

Murphy has turned the floor over the the prosecutor, who is wrapping up his opening remarks. Will watches the man intently, trying to get a read on who he is and how he might best be manipulated.

“The defendant and his council intend to claim that he is not criminally responsible for his actions because he is fundamentally lacking in a substantive capacity to appreciate the wrongfulness of his actions, and that further he lacked the volition to refrain from this behavior,” he says. “However,

the law does not shield individuals whose ‘mental disorder,’” and Will hears the air quotes, as does everyone else, “manifests only as repeated antisocial conduct.”

Will almost has to smile, seeing the course that the prosecutor’s argument is bound to take before he even continues. “While Mr. Lecter does have a *long* history of violent behavior, we will show any other mental health problems he may have are negligible and immaterial to the chain of illegalities that followed his murder of Mason Verger, which we will show was not the work of a man who had no control of his actions, but rather an extended act of extremely calculated brutality.”

Will schools his face carefully as he and Margot work their way through the throng of reporters outside of the courthouse, but when they are safely behind the tinted windows of Margot’s car, the privacy of their conversation guaranteed by the barrier between themselves and the driver, he breathes out something that approaches a sigh of relief.

“You think that went well,” Margot says, and her voice is careful but not questioning.

“I don’t know,” Will says, forcing himself to cut back his blooming sense of hope. He doesn’t want to jinx it. “It’s still a longshot, but I think that if their argument is that Hannibal isn’t crazy then Alana and Chilton are going to be a tremendous help to us when they take the stand.”

“Is he crazy?”

“We all are,” Will says, almost carelessly. He sees no reason to retread Hannibal’s culpability in Mason’s death; she knows perfectly well that Hannibal knew exactly what he was doing and choose to do it. “The point is, Friedrich is just smart enough to see that Hannibal is something really special. He’ll want Hannibal for himself - he’ll want to study him, and that would be considerably easier to do at the BSHCI. And Alana, bless her heart, thinks that anyone who is having a hard time is unstable and can’t help it.”

Will leans back in his seat and takes a deep breath.

He closes his eyes and says, “It might work out.”

Chapter 11

Hannibal takes the stand.

He looks out over the gallery and his eyes find Will, sitting beside Margot on one of the benches. Will looks as faded and strained as he did the first time Hannibal caught sight of him, several days earlier.

Will's eyes, which are swollen and ringed with red, glimmer like those of a wounded child. When he sees that Hannibal is watching him, Will looks away quickly. His face twitches miserably.

His lawyer is speaking. "Can you explain," Murphy says, "why you have filed an insanity defense?"

Hannibal has decided that the best thing for it is to be honest. He has decided to tell everyone exactly what he is.

When he addresses the courtroom he makes his voice calm and affable. "You all know that everyone here has at some point thought about doing what I did. You've all considered the possibility of killing someone - maybe even a few of you would have killed Mason, too, had you known what he was like and if you believed that you could get away with it.

"But, if you had, you would have felt remorse afterwards; it would have weighed on you, no matter what he'd done, and were you to find that you enjoyed killing him that would have troubled you most of all.

"And none of you - no normal, sane person - would have killed him the way that I killed him."

Hannibal turns to look at the jury. They have been shown the photos from the crime scene; what could be learned from the evidence that was left behind has been explained to them. He knows that they are afraid of him, but he keeps his face calm and his voice mellow.

"The way that I am - the type of crazy that I am - does not allow for me to feel this way. It does not force me to feel guilty or ashamed for what I did; I understand why you all think that it was a wrong thing to do, but I feel no compulsion to defer to the judgements of others or the letter of the law.

"I felt no inhibitions when I was doing it and I feel no guilt, now that it is done, and this is what makes me different from everyone else. This is why I am insane."

Everything that the lawyer says has been decided by Hannibal ahead of time. Murphy says now, on cue, "Tell us what you did to Mason Verger."

It is what they all want to know, of course, even if most of them would not have dared - or stomached - to ask. Only so much could be extrapolated from the forensic analysis.

"I took him apart while he was still alive," Hannibal says, simply. "I talked with him while I did it. I explained what I was doing and why, and whenever possible I showed him my work.

“Mason threatened. He begged and he pleaded and he screamed. He offered me things. Money. Power. Boy children.

“He said that I could marry his sister - that he would make her marry me and that I could use her any way that I pleased - and that my children would be the heirs to the entire Verger fortune, because he would get rid of Margot’s bastard for me.”

He meets Margot’s eyes across the courtroom, and because it will do nothing to hurt the picture of himself that is painting if he is honest in this way as well, Hannibal says, “I’m sorry that you’re hearing this now, Margot. I wanted to protect you from it.”

Margot does not flinch; Hannibal supposes that none of this comes as a shock to her.

He is instructed to refrain from addressing individuals in the gallery, and he nods at that and looks down at his hands, remembering the way that they looked in the light of the electric lantern, covered in Mason’s blood.

“That didn’t mean much to me at the time, but after I met Margot and her boy I was that much more glad for what I had done.

“I wanted Mason to know when he crossed the point where it would be impossible for him to survive. I was careful to make sure that he understood that he was dead already, even if he could still see and speak and understand, that even if help was to come that they wouldn’t under any circumstances be able to put back together what I had already taken out of him and cut to pieces.”

He lifts his head and looks out across the jury again, at their pale and frozen faces. There is an avid glow in the eyes of a few of them, but Hannibal knows that it is nothing that they will ever be able to own up to. They are good, normal people, and the cost of doing so would for them be too high.

Having heard this much, it’s the ones with that fascinated shine in their eyes that will be most willing to accept that he is insane, if only because it puts distance between themselves and Hannibal, but what he has said so far does not necessarily meet the legal standard for insanity, and they are not all yet sold on the idea.

“Mason’s record outraged me, but that wasn’t the real reason why I did it,” Hannibal goes on, knowing that he’s come to the tricky part now.

“I did it because he threatened Will. Everything that I’ve done since then has been for Will’s own good and for his protection. And to keep the both of us together, because we love each other.”

The important thing now is to plant the idea that he is delusional; that, despite all evidence to the contrary, he believes things that others can clearly see are not true. So Hannibal says again, with the same calm confidence that he has said everything else, “I love Will. Will loves me.”

In the gallery, Will seems to sink into himself. His arms are a straight jacket around his chest. Even from the stand, Hannibal can see the way that he is shaking.

“He doesn’t look like a man in love,” Murphy says, as though he is trying to break bad news to Hannibal gently. “He looks terrified of you.”

The prosecutor says, “objection,” and the judge says, “sustained,” but Hannibal answers anyway, raising his voice over the banging of the gavel but maintaining the same sedate tone.

“Will’s not doing well because you’re keeping him away from me. But he’ll be better once we’re together again.”

He says this as thought there is no doubt in his mind that they are soon to be reunited, and he puts all of the faith that he has in Will into his words.

It sounds sincere, even to his own ears, and Hannibal is glad for that. He's said very little that is untrue, but he hopes that Will understands that this, specifically, is something that he really believes - that he is confident that Will is going to rescue him.

Hannibal watches as Will turns and presses his face against Margot’s shoulder. She curls her arms around him protectively, and though no one can see his expression, Hannibal is absolutely certain that Will is grinning.

Chapter 12

When it's Will's turn to take the stand, Hannibal's lawyer gets first dibs on him.

Will can see how much the man wants to attack him - not from malice, but because that would be the best defence for Hannibal. Even Will, who knows so little of how these things work, can see that, just as clearly as he can see that Hannibal has forbidden Murphy from doing so.

Will makes it easy for him.

"I've accepted my role in what happened," Will says, as soon as the opportunity presents itself. "My responsibility for it. I made so many mistakes."

The lawyer is gentle with him. "Let's start at the beginning. How did you meet Hannibal?"

"He was referred to me by Dr. Alana Bloom."

Things have not been good between himself and Alana. Will knows that she was assigned to Hannibal when he first arrived at the prison, but that he sent her away in favor of a different doctor almost at once. Will has decided that he can do perfectly well without her approval or friendship, but she is slated to be called as a witness and he is worried about what she might say.

"And how long had you been treating Hannibal before you decided to pursue a romantic relationship with him?"

"About five months," he says. Will looks down at his hands briefly, miming the weight of shame on his slumped shoulders. Then he looks up and adds, "I didn't pursue - Hannibal insisted."

Will hesitates. "But I was in a position of authority over him and should have… done something else," he adds.

"Was this before or after he assaulted you the first time?"

"After," Will admits. "About a month after."

"Can you describe what he did to you?"

"He… um… did this."

Will gestures vaguely towards the scar on his cheek. His hand jitters.

"Can you turn so the jury can see?"

Will does so. He is clean shaven this morning, the better to make the tangled scar stand out starkly against his pallid skin. The eyes of the jury feel like needles against his skin.

Murphy says, "How did that happen?"

"I... um, invited him over to my house for dinner." Will looks down at his hands as the sentences come in short, jerky bursts. "He got angry with me. He knocked me down and pinned me against the floor, then he cut my face with his steak knife."

He wets his lips. “When he saw how I was bleeding, he threw the knife away. I thought that he was done, that he was calming down, but then something else happened to set him off, and -”

“What happened, exactly?” Murphy asks, but gently.

“I don’t know. I still don’t understand what I did wrong. Hannibal hit me. He hit me with his fists a lot of times - very, very hard.

“He broke three of my teeth. The ones I have now are implants. My nose was broken too, but not badly - I was lucky because that only needed a brace. I had to see a reconstructive surgeon about the cut… she did a lot of work to make the it look as unnoticable as it is,” he adds, knowing full well how blatant the tangle of scar tissue is. “It was worse before.”

Will glances at Hannibal. He is sitting very still, his eyes fixed on a point high above Will’s shoulder, so far inside of himself that he looks vacant.

“You didn’t contact the police?”

“No.” He shrugs miserably. “I didn’t want to get him into trouble.”

“But even after what he did, you agreed to a relationship? Can you explain that?”

“I can’t even explain it to myself, if I’m honest,” and he bleeds a note of helplessness into his voice, but not quite so much, he hopes, that he sounds pathetic.

“I knew it was foolish. My mother... she was a battered woman,” Will continues.

Now he allows himself to speak with a certain amount of emotional distance, as though he is communicating something that has been worked through after long and careful introspection.

“When I was younger I couldn’t understand why she didn’t do something - find someway to fight back or to get the both of us away from him, but I suppose I understand it better now. It’s very easy to ignore the worst about someone - at least, in the moments when it isn’t staring you right in the face - in favor of continuing to enjoy the good moments.”

Will look toward Hannibal again. His face is a series of hard lines that give nothing away emotionally, but Will knows that he is hurting Hannibal. He goes on anyway; there’s no other choice.

He speaks in a rush. “Hannibal is violently unstable, yes, but he seemed so genuinely upset afterwards. It was unprofessional of me not to say something to someone, but I honestly thought that I could help him and that he would benefit much more from my care than he would prison or hospitalization, and for a while he seemed to be getting better, so I thought..”

Murphy speaks into the silence as Will trails off. “Do you believe that he was in control of himself when he was hurting you?”

Will shakes his head and his hair flops down into his face. He’s made a point of letting it get longer than it ought to be, and of leaving it poorly combed. It make him look younger than he really is, he knows, and vulnerable.

“He absolutely was not. He wasn’t himself. Hannibal goes into these rages sometimes, sometimes they only last a few minutes but sometimes they're hours long. He disassociates and he doesn’t

know what he's done until later."

Will brushes the hair out of his face and steals a look at Hannibal. There's anger on his face now, out in the open for everyone to see. Up to this point there had almost been an element of fun in the gambit he is running, but now he starts to feel genuinely anxious. He wishes that he could explain to Hannibal how important it is that everyone believe that he lacks volition.

He pitches his voice sad and speaks softly. "I care deeply for Hannibal," he says, but is cut off by requests to speak louder so that everyone can hear him.

"I care for Hannibal," Will says again, "and I always will. I want to see him get help for his problems, but I understand now that I can't be the one to give it to him."

"Do you think that he's insane?"

Will pauses, evasive. "I think that he's horribly damaged and that he is hurting in a way that is... very difficult to see, but nonetheless profound."

"But do you think that he's insane?"

Will swallows. "Yes."

The prosecutor is an entirely different creature from Murphy, but at first Will believes that he has the thing well in hand. He knows perfectly well that, with the exception of Hannibal, he is the smartest person in the courtroom.

"You said that you believe that Hannibal is insane," the prosecutor says.

"I did," Will says. "I do."

"But you're no longer qualified to make a professional judgment on the matter, are you?"

Will controls a desire to show the man a flash of teeth. "No, I suppose not."

"Your licence is currently suspended, pending an ethics hearing, isn't that right?"

He allows himself a wince. "I was speaking as someone who knows Hannibal very closely, not as a professional."

"Were you were speaking as his victim?"

Will hesitates. There is a fine line between playing the role of a well-intentioned martyr for the sake of lifting some of the responsibility from Hannibal's shoulders - the better to make Hannibal seem a victim of circumstance and his own mind - and painting himself as spineless. He knows how easily pity becomes disdain, and he needs for the jury to like him if he's going to pull this off.

"I don't like to think about myself like that…" Will says slowly.

"As a victim?"

"Yes."

“Do you think it possible that you may have Stockholm syndrome?”

“Are you asking for my professional opinion now?” There’s a laugh from the jury box, and Will ducks his head sheepishly while the judge scolds them.

When there’s quiet again, Will brings out his best therapist voice, knowing that the jury can see the way he uses it as a shield to defend himself for his own uneasiness, and says, “I am aware that there’s a possibility that I do.

"But mental illness is a funny thing in that you can understand intellectually what your problem might be, you can even recognize that what you are thinking or feeling or doing are traits of a specific disorder, but that doesn't make them feel any less real to you.

“I don’t know if I do or not. I can’t diagnose myself, and I’m afraid that I’ve had a falling out with my own psychiatrist.”

“I ask because it seems like you must have had ample opportunities to run.”

“I tried. The police, I told them - they have pictures. They were entered as evidence, weren’t they?”

The prosecutor nods. He types into the keyboard that is connected to the screen on the wall. Images of Will’s scarred back appear on the screen.

“Explain, please, how that happened.”

“It was about a week after we got to Washington. I had the safe house there, you know, in case Margot might need to get away from her brother,” Will explains, and he allows that last word to sound like a curse in his mouth. “Hannibal happened to hear about that before - well, before everything else, so that’s where we went. Where he took me.

“I had been trying to think of some way to get away, or else to contact help. But he kept the keys on himself at all times, and when we made runs into town he was always there. The windows on the SUV are tinted, you know, and when we were in town he stayed low in the back so no one would see him.

“I wasn’t thinking very clearly at the time. He, um… bled me before we left Baltimore, and I was just starting to come out of the brain fog that came from that. But one day I thought, you know, that I would just walk into the woods - that I could get away that way, because Hannibal didn’t know the outdoors the way that I do. I’ve been a hunter almost all my life, you see, so I thought he wouldn’t be able to follow me.

“I got tired so quickly, though. The blood loss. And so he caught up with me.

“I had found a broken bottle while I was walking, and I held it out - I threatened him with it… I was too frightened to know what else to do. But when when he hit me, I dropped it. Then I turned to run, but he caught me and he pulled me down, and I guess that he’d picked the bottle up before all of that because he started to cut me…

“I passed out, I guess. When I woke up, all the cuts had been stitched up and cleaned.” He drops his eyes, truly ashamed, though not for the reason that he knows his audience will assume. “I remember feeling so grateful for that, like he’d done something really kind for me when I didn’t deserve it, you know?”

“You were at the house together for more than six months. You didn’t think about trying to run again?”

“I thought about it all the time, but I was scared.

“I was sure that Hannibal knew me well enough that he would sense it if I had any plans. At first, I was afraid of what he might do to me if I tried to leave, but then I started to worry about what he might do to himself, too. He was so… focused on me, almost for the start. A lot of the time he would say that I was the only thing he had, the only person who could understand him.

“He needed me so badly, and I didn’t know what to do.” And Will says, “I was scared.”

He’s scared now - scared of not selling this story well enough to be able to maneuver Hannibal into a position where he can help him, and he’s scared of Hannibal not understanding what he is trying to do and why. He lets that fear bleed into his voice.

The prosecutor says, “That doesn’t strike you as reflective of Stockholm syndrome?”

“I acknowledge the possibility, but that doesn’t mean -”

“Why didn’t you try to escape?”

“I was just scared,” he repeats.

His own tears disgust him, but Will knows that he can cry quite prettily, in a way that makes pitying hearts long to comfort him. It’s a trap that he’s used before, and he leverages it now, letting himself cry quietly.

The prosecutor does not acknowledge Will’s tears. *More fool you,* Will thinks, knowing that if he can make the jury hate the man for his callousness that Hannibal will stand a better shot.

“When did you learn that Hannibal killed Mason Verger?”

“The same night that he kidnapped me,” Will says. He takes a deep, shuddering breath then scrambles to insist that he had no idea Hannibal was the one who killed him. “I knew that he didn’t like Mason - that is, I know that he knew that I didn’t like him. But it never occurred to me that Hannibal was the one who killed him. I never would have dreamed that Hannibal could do… everything that he did to Mason.”

The tears are still falling, but Will sits up straight. He swipes at his eyes with the ball of his thumb, and makes his voice as steady as he can. “What Hannibal did was wrong - it was violent, and ugly, and horrifying - but that he was motivated by a desire to protect innocent people. I made a mistake, letting him know about Mason’s history. I knew that he was angry but I never thought -”

“Mason isn’t the one on trial here.”

Will feels his blood get hot. “Yeah, well, if Mason had ever made it to trial maybe we wouldn’t all be here today.”

The prosecutor narrows his eyes at Will, and there is an ice moment in which Will thinks, *he knows exactly what I’m doing and why.* He says without preamble, “Explain the bites on Mr. Lecter’s neck.”

Will feels himself beginning to sweat. He reminds himself of who he is supposed to be; he is a genteel doctor, soft spoken and kind, fond of dogs and charitable causes - he is a good hearted guy who just made a mistake.

“I don’t understand them myself. He wanted them but I don’t understand why. He… insisted that I do that to him.”

“You didn’t consent to it?”

Will glances toward Hannibal. His expression is as flat and cold as the Antarctic.

“I hated it. I never wanted to.”

He looks to Hannibal again, and Will sees to his horror that Hannibal believes him. Will watches the shame blooming in Hannibal, and he feels his own heart drop down into his belly. *I think I’m going to throw up*.

“I don’t...” Will starts, but he can see no way to finish the sentence that won’t end in disaster, and that is when Hannibal’s eyes go hard.

Will sees all of his anger there, bitter as strychnine and sharp as a linoleum knife, a livid rage that stretches far beyond a wounded sense of betrayal and well into the realm of hatred.

He is acting, tries to Will tell himself. *He understands his role and he is playing it well for the jury, and that is all.*

But it doesn’t feel like an act. It feels utterly real, and any efforts that Will’s mind can make to rationalize the way Hannibal is looking at him have absolutely no effect on his body, which begins to tremble badly.

It doesn’t matter how this goes, he thinks. *Whatever happens, I’ve already lost him.*

He resolves, though, to carry on with the plan; regardless of the outcome for himself, he owes it to Hannibal.

The prosecutor turns at looks up at the judge. “The defendant is attempting to intimidate my witness,” he says.

“No, it's alright,” Will says, but the shakiness of his voice lets everyone know how completely not alright it is, and the pounding of his own anxious heart insists that things will never be alright again.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal lays on his bunk, the print copy of *Tattle Crime* on the floor beside him. He worries.

If he were to turn his head, he knows that he would see the artist's sketches of himself and Will, each drawn during their respective tenures on the witness stand. In the sketches, Will's face is wet with tears, but in the one of Hannibal there is something clearly missing in the eyes. He hasn't had a lot of time to consider that yet, to worry if that's what he really looks like to others or if the artist was simply exercising creative license.

He's been too taken up with the headline. It runs atop the page in bold font, just above their heads:

DADDY DAHMER?

Hannibal's heart lurched when he saw that headline, suddenly terrified that Will had been found out. It was a struggle to control his face until he made it back to the semi-privacy of his cell.

Once he got a chance to read the first few lines of the article, his fear was replaced by a sudden, almost uncontrollable hilarity.

It wasn't a cannibalism pun, just an abysmally awful kink joke, and one that didn't even make sense in context, and despite - or maybe, because of - how astonishingly awful the wordplay was, even by Freddie's hackneyed standards, Hannibal felt laughter welling up inside of himself for the first time in months, and he turned over onto his chest and laughed silently into his pillow until tears streamed down his face, leaving wet patches on the fabric.

It was less funny once he finished the article.

Will is going to be livid. This is going to hurt him so badly.

In the article, Freddie Lounds expands upon Will's testimony about the domestic violence within his childhood home to build a narrative in which Will becomes a helpless victim, drawn by fate and circumstance to repeat his mother's mistakes by allowing a dangerous older man to dominate his life and draw him into a cycle of escalating violence, and Hannibal remembers the satisfying ache in his knuckles after he beat Will that time in the basement, and wonders if there wasn't some terrible grain of truth to Freddie's story, if unbeknownst to her.

She expounds further upon the idea that Will might have been drawn to Hannibal out of an unresolved desire for a father figure to replace the one that he lost at a young age, that the entire "nightmare" flows from Will's unresolved "father issues." There are no pictures of the man, but she writes that Hannibal bares an uncanny resemblance to him.

Hannibal is almost positive she made that part up out of whole cloth, but he wonders what Will's father really looked like. All Hannibal really knows is he was much larger than Will, and he imagines the man as being polished with the gleam of a well-tended hunting knife, sharp and deadly, but with an air of viciousness so much more banal and brutish than Will's own.

The press has been like this for months now, and while *Tattle Crime* is the worst offender, it is far from the only one to engage in wild speculation and innuendo.

Popular wisdom holds that Hannibal is the rapist in the equation, and Will his victim, but occasionally Hannibal has seen articles that suggest that Will took sexual advantage of a vulnerable patient when he began a relationship with Hannibal.

Hannibal thinks that it must be harder for Will to deal with it all. Will isn't used to people speaking poorly of him, and he takes everything so personally.

That's the other thing that weighs on him now; Hannibal had high expectations of Will's ability to sell a line of bullshit, but his performance on the stand still astonished him - Hannibal had never before seen anything quite on the same level as the dance that Will danced, the skillful intertwining of the truth and lies into such a complex and seamless design, but the end troubles him.

There were parts of Will's performance that hurt, and Hannibal does not deny this to himself; there were truths that cut too close to the bone, lies that turned good deeds that Hannibal was proud of into ugly abuse, conglomerations of fact and falsehood that dragged their love through the filth for the edification of an audience, but Hannibal understood the reasoning behind all of it.

He wishes that the shame in Will's face when he spoke of the bite scars was feigned, but he knows that is not entirely the case. It makes him worry that he did something wrong when he asked for that, that his acceptance and encouragement somehow hurt Will more than he had realized.

Hannibal considers the performance that he gave to counterpoint Will's own poor in comparison, a simple channeling of the frustration and simmering rage that he has kept carefully in check these last few months, augmented with his hurt at hearing the marks Will gave him spoken of in front of so many strangers who could not possibly understand, then directed at Will for the sake of reinforcing the narrative they needed to sell.

He knows that the fear and pain on Will's face when Hannibal turned all of that anger on him was not feigned, and the fact that no one will doubt that Will really is afraid of him ought to work to their benefit, but he worries that Will might have taken it to heart.

Will isn't as stable as he pretends to be, even at the best of times, he knows. Hannibal worries about him.

When he hears the fall of Caleb's steps approaching the door of his cell, Hannibal sits up quickly and sweeps the copy of *Tattle Crime* under his bunk, embarrassed not only of the article about himself but at the thought of being caught with such a trashy rag at all.

Hannibal looks up expectantly at the younger man, welcoming a distraction. It is Saturday, and most of the inmates don't have work today. Hannibal has already read through his weekly allowance of two books from the library three times now, and he is bored even with expanding the complex structure of memory and desire that he has been building inside his head.

Caleb stands just outside the open doorway. On the weekends, they are allowed to rest in their own cells, but inmates are not supposed to enter any other than their own.

"Trial going the way you hoped?"

Hannibal shrugs noncommittally; he likes the kid, but he has no intention of jeopardizing his defense by crowing now, not when he can't be sure who might be listening. And he doesn't want to risk jinxing the thing.

He knows, in any case, that Caleb isn't really expecting an answer.

"You figure you're rolling out of here soon, yeah?" Caleb asks, and Hannibal hears the regret in his voice.

"One way or the other." There is no death penalty in Maryland, but Hannibal expects to be transferred directly to a supermax prison if his defense falls through. He's shown that he can't be trusted to play well with others, in or outside of prison. "As things stand, there should be one more day of witness testimony before things begin to wrap up."

"It's been a pretty long one," Caleb observes. Hannibal shrugs again. He doesn't say that it would have been considerably longer if they'd actually been able to pin any of Will's vigilante kills on him. There was no real evidence, of course, just speculation on the part of Freddie and other opportunists, and the actual work that had been done on the other bodies was considerably different in both means and method, so the prosecutor decided instead to go with the claim that Hannibal tried to pass Mason off as the victim of an as of yet uncaptured killer.

"We're having a spread in the cafeteria tonight, like around six," Caleb says. "You know what that is?"

Hannibal nods. He tries to hide his distaste, but Caleb sees it anyway. "Look, you don't have to eat if you don't want to. I know that your stomach gives you trouble."

The prevailing wisdom among the young men who follow Hannibal around like lost ducklings is that Hannibal eats so little because the bullet that tore through his guts left some lingering internal injury, and Hannibal has done nothing to confirm or deny this.

"But you can come hang out, you know?" Caleb goes on.

I'm being invited to a party, he realizes that, and on the heels of that comes the disquieting suspicion that the party in question is being held in his honor. The idea embarasses him, somehow, and he can't bring himself to ask for fear that he is wrong and will be seen as presumptuous.

But Caleb has no trouble guessing what's bothering Hannibal. It's strange to Hannibal, still, to be read so easily by someone who's insights carry so little baggage of cruelty. He's grown accustomed to Will's weaponized empathy, and though it's been a long time since he turned it on Hannibal like a knife, he knows that Will always goes armed.

Caleb, on the other hand, is far more at ease with his own feelings and those of others than is strictly good for an inmate.

"You should come," he tells Hannibal frankly. "The guys are going to miss you. They want to say goodbye."

When Caleb is is gone, Hannibal lays back down on his bed and thinks for a while.

Since the trial started, he has avoided doing anything that might get him thrown back into seg. Seeing the way his old suit hung off him during that first day of the trial was a wake-up call, one that has left him worried about the implications of the damage that he may already have done to his body and what it might mean if he allows things to get much worse.

Since then, he's been working on his problem - trying to make up for lost ground or at least to stop dropping weight.

Will's shade encourages him in this, when Hannibal goes inside of his head to visit with him. Hannibal knows that he has been stubborn and foolish, letting things get as bad as they have, but Will doesn't scold; he tells Hannibal that they both have jobs to do now, and getting himself healthy so he will be ready to run or fight if he needs to is part of Hannibal's.

He's eating most of his meals now, and supplementing them with granola bars and V-8 juice from the commissary. Prisoner cuisine, though, is not a challenge that he has thought to prepare himself for.

Let your friends show you a good time, Will says from inside of his skull. *There's no harm in it, and it'll make them happy.*

Hannibal nods to himself at that, accepting it as good advice.

He isn't sure if he should bring something with him to the cafeteria. On the one hand, he feels as though failing to contribute might be seen as rude, but on the other he wonders if he is expected to allow himself to be treated.

An hour before he is expected in the cafeteria he settles on soda and chips as a safe bet, something useful that isn't apt to outshine anyone else's contribution, and goes to the commissary to request half a dozen of each.

The inmate inside the wire cage looks at him boredly and says, "The limit is three."

Hannibal blinks. Up to this point, he has only bought one or two things for himself at a time. "Of each or total?"

"Each."

Through the opening in the wiring he passes Hannibal a laminated Commissary List, and Hannibal studies it. He spent much of his childhood cradled in the web of Soviet bureaucracy, and he has had some experience with the prison system from the perspective of law enforcement, but still the arbitrariness of the rules within the prison continue to baffle him.

The stupidity of it makes him stubborn.

"There's twenty different condiments on this list, and I can buy each and every one right now, but I can't have two of the same kind?"

"I don't make the rules."

There is a great deal of money in Hannibal's commissary account, considerably more than he put in there himself. He suspects that either Will or Margot used an emissary to move the funds into it,

though he knows it is possible that he has a secret admirer somewhere outside the prison walls; already, he has received in the mail a number of unusual letters from lonely women and sexually forward men.

He looks at the list with its categories: Candy (Limit 3), Condiments (Limit 1 each), Drinks (Limit 3), Food (Limit 5 each), Soup (Limit 10 total), Snacks (Limit 3 of each), Dental Products (limit 1 of each), Health Products (limit 2 each).

He looks up. “Fine then. I want the maximum of everything that I can get.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

Hannibal hoods his eyes and makes his face quietly dangerous. “I am.”

The other man is not impressed. “Dude, you pull dumb shit like this and they’re just going to end up tightening the rules on everyone.”

Hannibal hears Will whispering in his ear, indignant at this nonsense and encouraging him to dig his heels in. “It’s my money.”

"Everything on the list?"

"Yes," Hannibal tells him.

“You're saying that *you* want a hair pick?”

“I’m allowed one, aren’t I?”

“You’re white.”

“It’s a gift.”

“You want a clear tunes radio, *and* a sony radio, *and* a mp3 player?”

“And as many mesh tote bags as needed to carry everything. I don’t see any limit on the bags, correct?”

“You know if you can’t fit everything under your bunk tonight they’re going to confiscate it, yeah? And probably throw your ass in seg for being a dipshit.”

“I’ll worry about that.”

“Fuck’s sake.”

Somewhere in the corner of Hannibal’s mind, Will watches, impressed and delighted with him. Picturing Will’s grin brings a smile to Hannibal’s own face, though it’s more sedate.

“Thank you for the help.”

All together the bags are quite a load, the tins of meat, cans of V-8 juice and bottles of shampoo and hair products weighing him down as he makes his way to the cafeteria. He gets angry at himself all over again, knowing that he should have taken better care of his body during his time here, that it might come to pass that his life or Will’s depends on his being fit enough to defend them both.

They aren't alone in the cafeteria, Hannibal's little crowd. Only two meals are served a day on the weekends, and a lot of the inmates get hungry in the evening. They come to the cafeteria to use the microwave, cobbling together meals from what's available in the commissary, if they have the money for it.

They have a couple of good tables near the back of the room though, quiet as it gets but with a good line of sight to keep an eye on the door. They pause and look at each other when Hannibal comes into the cafeteria, then Caleb and two of the others get up and come to him. The other two stay behind, holding the tables.

The smile on Caleb's face as they approach Hannibal is uncertain.

"I may have gone a bit overboard," he allows, and he hands a couple of the bags over to the guys as they make their way to the tables in the back.

Eyes follow them. Inmates, watching with curious speculation, and the CO in the high-placed armored bubble that gives him a view of the entire room.

The ingredients meal are arranged on one of the tables; bags of instant noodles, squeeze cheese, a plastic container of salsa, corn chips and Cheetos, a spicy pickle in a plastic sleeve, Oreos and peanut butter.

Hannibal is proud when he takes the tins of meat out of his back and lines them up beside the rest. Chunked chicken and salmon and tuna, all of it apt to make Hannibal nauseous simply from the smell, but he knows how desperately recognizable source of animal protein are coveted here, when what meat they get is usually soy-supplemented reconstituted ground beef and phoney baloney.

He thinks he understands now why Will was always so pleased to bring his game home for Hannibal to see. There is a pleasure in providing for others, and that is heightened when resources are in short supply or when one can contribute something rare and highly coveted.

From his side, Barry says, "We weren't going to put meat in it, though. In case you got hungry after all."

"Don't worry about that," Hannibal says, and hears Will in his own voice, the easy reassurance. He picked up so many things from Will - can sense Will's influence in the cadence of his speech, in the turns of phrase that he has come to use, in his gestures and facial expressions and in how he thinks about the world and his position in it relative to others.

Hannibal knows that he has effected Will in just the same way, and if anything more powerfully, that even after so long apart when Will looks in the mirror he will see Hannibal in the curve of his own smile and in the curl of his snarling lips.

He has approached the idea of friendship with these five in the same manner that Hannibal images Will might, and has handled each of them as carefully as Will handled him in the early days of their sessions together.

Hannibal does what he has seen Will do. He listens quietly, and makes his face thoughtful and sympathetic, and does not render judgement. It would never have occurred to him, before recently,

that he had the skillset to help people in this way, yet they consider him to be a good listener, and a trustworthy older presence.

Each of them has come to him in private, told him things that leave them vulnerable but which they badly needed to unload, and he's helped them as much as they can be helped. He wonders if he always had the potential to play this role or if it is one of the ways in which loving Will has changed him.

Ron has cried in front of him.

Jim has ground his teeth together and cursed and wished out loud that someone would do what Hannibal did to Mason to the man who hurt him, has wished that he had the chance to do something like that himself. As angry as he is, Hannibal believes Jim when he says the possession charges that brought him here were bullshit; he knows perfectly well how often cops plant evidence.

Daryle speaks hardly more than Hannibal does himself, but the wounds show, in how he carries himself and in the way his eyes dart around, constantly hyper vigilant, and in the needle tracks on his arms.

Barry is strange and perhaps, Hannibal thinks, mildly intellectually disabled. He is too open and honest, blatant in his joy and his rages, and Hannibal worries about him most of all because he is so oblivious to what an obvious fall guy he is.

Then there is Caleb, bright and charming and kind, the only one of the lot with a murder conviction. He'd been sixteen at the time. It was his stepfather. Even before Caleb came to him with the story, seeking understanding or absolution or maybe approval, Hannibal understood that Caleb has the same potentially dangerous excess of empathy as Will, though it has not been twisted so far out of true by anxious rage and a desperate need for self-righteousness. He knew too, before Caleb told him, that what he did to the man he did for others - to protect his sister and little brother rather than himself.

Though he rarely speaks of himself, he feels that he is known by them as well, perhaps better than anyone but Will and Margot know him. None of them are like Hannibal - there is nothing fundamentally wrong with them, the way that Hannibal knows there is something wrong with himself - but they are not worried by his potential for violence. It reassures them, because they believe that violence will shield rather than target them.

That was what brought them to him at first, all except Caleb; he is frightening in a very specific way that made them aspire towards the hope that if they stayed in his general vicinity that anyone who might want to hurt the would be too frightened of Hannibal to try.

There's a sense of satisfaction in his role as watchdog and confidant, but he has known from the start that he won't be here for very long, and he worries now it was a mistake to give them an ear to talk into and a shoulder to cry on, that he might be encouraging softness in young men whose survival may hinge on learning how to shunt pain and fear aside - on looking and being hard so they will not become targets.

And too, there is a suspicious corner of his mind that wonders if he has been using them to learn things about himself. He has found in himself a pleasure not just at offering advice, but at being the center of attention, being regarded as object of admiration and respect rather than a dangerous curiosity.

But he tries not to worry about any of that now, watching the five of them watching him unpack the bags. He sees now why Will got such a kick out of spending money on other people, and why he could feel so anxious when Hannibal demurred.

They are as uneasy about the gifts as they are excited, and Hannibal tries to explain himself. “The guy in the commissary was rude. I wanted to give him a hard time.”

That was the whole of his motivation at the time, though he is pleased now to have things to give away, but he sees that they don’t believe him - that they they think that he planned this, and are touched and a little worried by that. Caleb, especially, is troubled, though he says nothing about it when he draws Hannibal off from the rest of the group to help him make the cake.

He uses the second of the tables they’ve claimed as his work space, and transfers the ingredients to there. Caleb sits a plastic cup on the table, beside a small, unused trash bag, and then he opens one of the sleeves of vanilla oreos.

“The first thing we do is scrape the cream off the cookies and put it aside,” he explains. “That will be the frosting. Then we smash the cookies up super fine.”

Hannibal can’t help being dubious, but he takes the spoon that Caleb offers and gets to work separating the cream and cookies.

The others are working on the spread, and with the embarrassment of riches that Hannibal has provided them with, which ingredients to use becomes a topic of loud and lengthy debate. It’s easy for Caleb to pitch his voice low enough that he won’t be overheard by the others.

“I don’t get why you’re shooting for insanity,” he says, beginning to crush the cookies. “You aren’t nuts.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yeah. I am. But even if you were, it’s better here than at the hospital. We have more freedom here - you get work to do here, and when you aren’t busy with that you can study or work out or spend rec time together like we are doing or out in the yard.

“I’ve got a sister-in-law who worked at the BSHCI and she says that there are men there that haven’t been out of their cells in years, and that they are never going to be allowed out until they are dying or already dead.”

And Hannibal, who is responsible for putting some of the men Caleb speaks of in those forever cells, says, “I’ve been there. I know what it’s like.”

“Then why -”

“Don’t worry about it,” he tells Caleb, in a tone that forecloses the conversation. He adds, “Don’t you think those cookies are smashed enough?”

Caleb looks down at his work as though he’d forgotten about it. “Yeah - cool,” he agrees.

“What do you do next?”

“We add a little bit of water - not a lot or it will get goopy - and knead it together until we have a ball of dough.”

“Let me try it out,” Hannibal says, conscious of Caleb’s missing fingers and the pain that hand gives him. Caleb passes Hannibal the bag with the mixture inside of it, and Hannibal begins to knead it through the plastic. “It smells good,” he says, more or less truthfully - the scent is cloyingly sweet but good.

“Of course. It’s cookies.” Caleb takes a honey bun from its packaging and begins to slice it into thin stripes with a plastic butter knife.

“Where’d you learn to do this?”

“Guess I’ve been here long enough to pick up how to make correctional cake,” Caleb says. He grins, unabashed. “Mine's the best.”

“I don’t doubt it. But have you thought about mixing in some of the lemon juice I’ve got over there?”

“There’s a thought. You think it would be an improvement?”

“It will go well with the vanilla,” Hannibal says, and with no more conversation he goes to the other table and picks up the lemon-shaped squeeze bottle.

The others have their own trash bag, into which they have put multiple blocks of ramen, some of the cans of chunked chicken, hot sauce and several other condiments. Carefully, they take cups of water they heated in the microwave and pour them into the bag, before tying it shut.

Hannibal kneads some of the lemon juice into the dough; he rather wishes that he’d thought about this sooner, but he is able to fold it in well enough.

Caleb tells him, “Separate the dough into two balls and then press them flat, until they are little smaller than the surface of the plate,” and when Hannibal has finished with the first and has transferred it to plate, Caleb begins to layer the slices of honey bun on top of it.

“My sister-in-law says that the food is worse at the hospital than it is here, too,” he says, as he places the last layer of dough on top of the cake and starts to mold the edges together.

It’s enough to shock a small horrified laugh out of Hannibal. “Just imagine that.”

When Caleb adds a bit of water to the cream filling to make it spread more easily and begins to spread it haphazardly on the top of the cake, Hannibal finds himself annoyed. He takes the spoon from Caleb and shows him how to do it properly, and when the frosting is neat and smooth they add crushed peanut m&ms to the top.

At the first table, the others are finishing up the spread. They have mixed in the squeeze cheese and salsa, and have torn the bag open as neatly as possible, so that it serves as now a platter for the meal. As Caleb carries the cake over to join them, Hannibal falling a step behind, Barry and Ron top the spread with crumbled hot cheetos.

Hannibal is not sure, when he finds himself seated at the table with a fork in hand, if he has the constitution for this, but the others are watching him expectantly, and he does not wish to be rude.

The presentation is lacking, but it really doesn’t look that bad, Will says, from the space inside of Hannibal’s skull, and for the first time he finds himself annoyed at the voice. *You can go to any*

bourgie grocery store anytime and get whatever suits you, he thinks in return, and though it is a bitter thought he feels that he must concede that Will isn't completely wrong.

When Hannibal takes the first bite, he finds that the flavors and textures are surprisingly complex, and yet do not clash the way that he'd expected.

Their eyes are on him, awaiting a verdict. "This is the best thing I've had since I was shot," he says, and because he is afraid that might sound as though he is damning the meal with faint praise, he adds, "You've all done an astonishing job of making something tasty and creative out of almost nothing."

It pleases them all, hearing that, and Hannibal knows that they feel as though they have conquered a tremendous challenge just in creating something that he doesn't hate, and that encourages him to eat more than he might have otherwise.

The cake is even better, and everyone agrees that the lemon juice was a stroke of genus, and Hannibal finds himself suddenly overcome at having found such acceptance among these men, though they are mostly decent people who made mistakes or ended in bad situations and though they have a good idea of just how fucked up he is.

I'm going to miss this, he realizes. *I'd trade it all for five more minutes with Will, but I am going to miss it.*

Chapter End Notes

Not sure how I ended up with 4k+ words on Hannibal's stay in the prison, but I hope that it wasn't dull. This is the last that we will see of the prison crew,as he's soon to be transferred.

Chapter 14

Fully sated for the first time since his arrest and as content as it is possible for him to be, locked away from the man he loves and with the weight of an uncertain future dangling over him, Hannibal lays in his bunk, entirely still, until he is certain that his cellmate is asleep. Then he reaches beneath the scratchy blanket and takes his cock in his hand. He is cautious to avoid shaking the bed frame or making any noise as he strokes himself.

There are moments when Hannibal feels certain that he and Will are doing or thinking or feeling the same thing in the same instant, that the barriers drawn between them by distance and prison walls have fallen away and that in that in those moments it is possible for the lines that divide their consciousnesses to blur.

Though it is impossible for him really know what Will is doing now, Hannibal wishes to think - chooses to believe - that Will is touching himself too, and is thinking about Hannibal as he does so.

That Hannibal is right, at least this time, is perhaps unremarkable; it's an easy guess that at this time of night a lonesome man, cut off from his lover and sleepless with worry, might in this way seek to occupy himself. But if Hannibal knows, through some metaphysical bond or by merit of intimate knowledge of Will and his moods, just how miserable Will is in this moment, tugging at himself dejectedly as he cycles through memories and emotional impressions of Hannibal in a quest to find something inspiring enough to overcome his fear for their future for long enough to grant himself release, Hannibal shies away from that knowledge, preferring to imagine Will enjoying himself.

He does not allow himself to consider that the reason he is himself having such difficulty getting hard might be because Will is facing the same challenge.

Far away and in his own bed, Will thinks about Hannibal's face and the way that he moved on the night that he killed Mason, the thoughtful and deliberate manner in which he drew that first line of blood down the midline of his body, the shallow cut a promise of things to come, but the passion of this memory is marred by the knowledge that all the trouble that they've come into stems from a mistake made that night, and he puts it aside.

Will tries instead to think about Hannibal's hands, the size of them and their gracefulness and all of the power they hold, and of how fine it is to lean into Hannibal's touch and feel half his head cradled safely in one of those huge hands, the sensation of feeling the texture of the skin of Hannibal's palms and his fingertips against his own skin. He thinks about how it feels when Hannibal's warm hands curl themselves around his cock, how they are large enough to engulf it, but then the picture turns anxious as his mind circles back around to the idea that Hannibal is angry with him, that he has wounded Hannibal and the Hannibal will hate him now, and that brings alive in him the memory of Hannibal using his fists on him. Will thinks of the potentiality for violence that those hands offer, pictures them wrapped around his throat, the strangling fingers long enough to meet one another at the back of his neck, and it's true that there is a certain element of arousal in that fear but mostly it is only fear, and the fear is followed closely by self-disgust at the unworthiness of his fear, because Will knows that the only time Hannibal laid hands on him he deserved it - had earned everything Hannibal gave him and more - and he is appalled by his own cowardice and the cruelty of allowing himself to still fear being hurt by Hannibal when Hannibal

has so much more cause to worry for his own safety and so much more to hold against him and yet has forgiven Will all the same.

It turns everything miserable, and even as Will considers giving it up as a bad job Hannibal is thinking that he ought to accept that he is not going to be able to make this work tonight.

But Will's thoughts turn to the softness of Hannibal's face while he is asleep, and the soft lines of pleasure on his face when Will is touching him in a way that makes him feel good, and despite himself he thinks about the feel of Hannibal's flesh under his teeth and the taste of his blood. He thinks about how good it feels to have Hannibal inside of him, and the prideful pleasure that comes into Hannibal's face when he makes Will come, how pleased Hannibal - who has yet to lose his composure during sex, but who reaches his climate with an intense inner focus that seems to make him glow with a radiant beauty from the inside out - is when he induces in Will the need to cry out or beg or lock his teeth around something.

And so Will is smiling when he gets himself off at last, and the smile on his face is the same one that Hannibal imagines as he brings himself silently to completion.

Hannibal's hand is sticky. Were Will here, he knows, he would take it by the wrist in both of his own hands and bring it to his lips like a chalice. He would run his warm tongue over Hannibal's palm and he would suck on Hannibal's fingers, drawing them one by one into his mouth, all the way down to the scarred knuckles, and he would look up at Hannibal with hooded eyes as he did it, the laugh lines around his eyes crinkling with delighted amusement at his own wantonness.

For a long time Hannibal wondered what the appeal in this ritual was for Will, fretted that it might be linked to that other hunger, the one that is difficult for him to accept, but Will's motives don't worry him anymore. There is in Will a desire to draw Hannibal into himself, he knows, to bring the two of them so close together that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other, but he knows that Will would rather cut his own throat than do Hannibal any meaningful or lasting physical harm; even before he accepted the idea that Hannibal could love him, Will chose to put his life into Hannibal's hands rather than kill him.

Thinking about this, Hannibal reaches for the roll of toilet paper stored under his bed, and with that action the squalid reality of his current situation descends on him again. It brings with it a dull and lonesome ache.

Soon, he tells himself, and though he has faith that Will will come for him, the waiting is terrible.

Chapter 15

By the time Margot is finished on the stand, Hannibal is weeping openly.

He feels no shame in this, and sees no reason why he ought to hide it; much of their defense, after all, rests on the idea that he was so shaken by Mason's actions that it unhinged him. And, he suspects, too, that if the jury sees how profoundly moved he is by Margot's testimony they will themselves be so swept up into the drama of the thing that they will forget the chain of causality and put aside the fact that he did not meet Margot until after he killed Mason as emotionally unsatisfying.

Margot does not cry. When she is dismissed from the stand she does not flee, but walks back to the gallery with her head held high, haughty and dignified but somehow looking painfully young, and when Hannibal turns his head and follows her with his eyes he sees the way that Will unfolds from within himself to put on a brave face to comfort her, rising from the bench just as her veneer of calm begins to crack. They shepherd one another from the courtroom, and Will hooks his arm over her shoulders protectively and draws her close against him, preemptively shielding her with his body from the reporters who wait outside.

They don't come back again that day, which means that Will not only misses Alana Bloom's testimony, but that he isn't there to watch when Frederick Chilton takes the stand in Hannibal's defense.

Hannibal is disappointed by that.

He wanted Will to see how well he'd gotten the fool to dance for him.

Though Hannibal did not request her, it was Alana Bloom who showed up for his psych evaluation, within days of his expressing the intention to enter an insanity plea.

When she sat down at the table across from him, Hannibal folded his hands together and said, "Well, I suppose that you've decided I'm fucked up enough to be your patient after all."

"I'm sorry, Hannibal," she told him. Her face telegraphed sympathy and regret, the feelings large in her round eyes, and there was something about that struck Hannibal as unseemly. "You needed a very specific type of help - the sort of help that Will did not have the training to provide - but I didn't see it. I failed you both when I transferred you to him."

Hannibal didn't answer. He sat entirely still while Dr. Bloom worked at him, trying to convince him to open up, and he saw himself as she saw him; some poor thing, a helpless victim of his own damaged psyche, and he thought, *Will can be hideously cruel but he never sought to reduce me in this way under the pretext that it was for my own good*.

He put up with it for as long as he could, then he made a half-hearted effort to get access to Will, knowing that it wouldn't work but also knowing that the request was what was expected of him, if he understood the role that Will needed him to play.

“Thank you for coming to see me,” he said, and knew from the set of Dr. Bloom’s eyes that she was canny enough to at least to hear the subtle bite of venom in his voice. “But I would like to speak with Dr. Graham before we proceed. Can you contact him for me?”

“Dr. Graham is not currently practicing. His licence has been suspended pending an ethics hearing.” This was the first Hannibal heard of the professional problems Will was facing, and he would have liked to ask more, but then she leaned across the table and took his hands.

Hannibal wanted to pull away from the touch, unsolicited and unwelcomed, but he could tell from the way she was watching him that Dr. Bloom might reach all sorts of conclusions if he asserted a right to his own personal space.

Sympathy seemed to flow out of her eyes and down over him, sticky and uncomfortable. She said, “What Will did was wrong. You should have never been put in a situation where things could spiral so entirely outside of your control.”

It was Hannibal’s understanding that, statistically, prison psychiatrist was not a particularly hazardous occupation. The rarity of an inmate attacking his therapist was reflective in the fact that the only security measures in this office were the camera mounted on the wall and the panic button that rested in Dr. Bloom’s lap. He debated the merits of becoming an exception to the rule.

Instead, he pulled his hands away and leaned back his chair, regarding her coldly. “You’re trying to force me into moral dignity pants. Do you realize that?”

“I hope you understand that an insanity plea is contingent on your having lacked cogency at the time of your actions. You can have it one way or the other.”

Her voice was level, not rising to Hannibal’s bait, but he could see the emotions strumming under her skin. She needed so badly be in control of the narrative, to be the one to tell him what was wrong with him and why it wasn’t really his fault.

Will is a better doctor than she is, he thought. *Will listened to what I said about myself, he didn’t make up his mind right out of the gate on the basis of pity.*

I *would be a better doctor than she is.*

But then, of course, a good doctor wasn’t what he needed. He needed someone who would be easy to manipulate, so he said, “I’d like to see Dr. Frederick Chilton for my psych eval instead.”

Hannibal watched her trying to be professional. “I don’t think you and Dr. Chilton would be a good fit,” she told him.

“Will you contact him for me or shall I have my lawyer do it?”

Dr. Bloom leaned in across the table, and Hannibal could sense how badly she wanted him to believe that she was on his side - and how sincerely she really thought that she was.

She said, "I’m Will’s friend, and I care about him, but I know that he’s lying.”

Hannibal remembered the casual way Will confessed to often wanting to strangle her, the way he spoke of using her as a barometer of whether or not he was passing as normal enough.

He made his voice bored and slightly mocking. “What do you imagine he’s lying about?”

“Your scars,” she said, and though Hannibal scoffed at that he felt a jolt of alarm at the dawning of an awareness that she might be smarter than he’d given her credit for. “The bites themselves and the specific type of hostility that Will tried to mask behind shame and distress when I brought them up to him.”

He smiled with his teeth. “The falling out Will mentioned,” he’d observed. “Are you sure that you aren’t violating doctor-patient confidentiality right now, Dr. Bloom?”

She’d gotten defensive enough at that to make Hannibal think that he’d guessed right, and now that Dr. Bloom is on the stand, he notes that she makes no mention of Hannibal’s marks or what Will said about them.

Dr. Bloom is focused on Will’s past.

“Will has a history of unprofessional engagement with patients,” she says. “Early in his career there was a young man who had recently been released - on Will’s recommendation - from the violent ward at a major psychiatric hospital. The patient was not well enough to live on his own, and shortly after his release he attacked someone. The police were never able to find him, but there were witness reports that said that people had seen the young man going into and coming out of Will’s house in the days leading up to the attack - that he seemed to be living there, or at least spending the night often.”

The prosecutor asks, “Are you suggesting that Dr. Graham was sleeping with this patient?”

“I wouldn’t want to speculate,” Dr. Bloom says carefully, and Hannibal pulls skins his upper lip back from his teeth for just a fraction of a second before making his face still again. “He might have just been offering the patient somewhere safe to sleep. But it’s demonstrative of bad judgement on his part.

“And that’s been a pattern throughout his career. I can’t speak too specifically without violating doctor-patient confidentiality, but he has a history of becoming too emotionally invested in patients, of failing to put in place or maintain boundaries.

“We’ve argued about this before, several times. When he told me that he was planning on dating an ex-patient - Hannibal - we might have argued then, but Will refused to fight. He kept saying, ‘I know you’re right, but…’ and ‘I agree with you in principle but this is a special situation.’ He has a way of validating your concerns but then shrugging them off and doing what he was planning on doing the whole time anyway.

“Will is... manipulative in that way. He makes it difficult to stay angry with him, even when you know he’s in the wrong, because eve when he hasn’t budged an inch he seems so accommodating.”

“It sounds like you had a number of professional concerns about Dr. Graham, yet you still referred Mr. Lecter to him. Why?”

“I can’t speak on that specifically,” she says, and though Hannibal knew that Dr. Bloom wouldn’t talk about their sessions together he is nonetheless relieved. He remembers going to that first appointment with her, something in his chest already feeling lighter at the anticipation of finally being able to speak with someone about his problems - at being seen and understood and offered help. And he remembers the sinking feeling that came when she gently corrected what little he had the chance to tell her about himself.

Hannibal remembers sitting woodenly in the chair during their last session, listening to her telling him that his concerns were exaggerated, that he was not as innately malign as he felt himself to be, but simply traumatized, and that she knew another doctor who would be a better fit for him, someone who cared deeply about his patients and who was talented at helping them to better understand themselves.

“I can say that while I have my professional reservations about Will, I have never doubted that he meant well by his patients. That’s what… concerns me about his support for Hannibal’s insanity defense.”

“Do you think Hannibal is insane?” the prosecutor asks.

Hannibal holds his breath; he knows that if Dr. Bloom has put too many pieces together, this might be the point where everything about their story gets picked apart.

“Yes,” she says. “But I worry that Will isn’t thinking about things on the terms of whether or not Hannibal is responsible for his actions, but is trying to help him avoid the consequences of those actions.

“Even after everything that’s happened, I think he’s still trying to protect Hannibal.”

It’s hard not to smile; after all, she’s right.

Hannibal has always understood court proceedings to be a type of theater, but nothing drives that home like having a front row seat to the trial that may determine his entire future.

The jury is an audience, and like any audience they want a good story; Margot’s testimony had pathos but it left most of them with a sick feeling in the stomach or else a stinging ball of rage in the chest. It drained them, and the slight intrigue of Dr. Bloom’s testimony did little to lift them up.

It is, therefore, a great stroke of luck that Chilton is called to the stand last. After so much heaviness they are ready for some comic relief, and Chilton is dramatic and entertaining and eager to impress his audience.

While he was conducting Hannibal’s psych eval Chilton tossed diagnoses at Hannibal like he was trying to see what would stick, and he drags these out now like a child showing off his baseball card collection.

He has encouraged Chilton in this, knowing that it can only aid his cade.

Hannibal is a borderline, Chilton says now, as is evident from his violently possessive behavior. But he is also a narcissist, and unable to grasp why it was not his place to take justice into his own hands. He has an anxiety disorder, and depression, and is likely on the autistic spectrum, which is why he does not understand the emotions of others nor often his own. He is psychotic and anorexic and plagued by PTSD.

The frustration at Will’s unwillingness to give Hannibal a term by which he might label and thus better understand himself still weighs on Hannibal occasionally, but he sees the other extreme for the farce that it is. He knows that there might be some truth to nearly every label Chilton tries to stick on him, but even with his layman’s knowledge base he knows that the man is using many

terms incorrectly, that diagnoses and the lists of associated symptoms that he is rattling off are outdated and unsubstantiated.

“There is no one else like Hannibal Lecter, and my being allowed to study him at greater length will yield remarkable insight into his kind,” Chilton says in closing, and if the contradiction in that statement troubles anyone in the jury Hannibal doesn’t see it in their faces.

When witness testimony wraps up, Hannibal feels himself one step closer to Will and to freedom.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Nothing graphic, but there's a reference to past CSA in this one. Tread carefully if you need to, friends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they are safely inside Will's car, Margot tells him, "Drive. I don't care where - out of the city."

So he does.

The quiet is suffocating, and Will hopes that Margot will cry, or rage, or in some other way vent the pain of what just happened, but she is quiet for a long time. Will turns over in his head the memory of Margot's face when the prosecutor asked her why, if Mason was so bad, she hadn't try harder to report him.

Margot is, like Hannibal, difficult to read if you don't know what to look for. Unlike Hannibal, it is not vicious feelings that sometimes slip out from around the edges of her mask, but fear. The memory of fear, and of the pain that came with it, made Margot's eyes large and round as she answered, but otherwise very little emotion showed on her face. Will suspected that only he himself, and perhaps Hannibal, were the only ones who were equipped to understand how much the answer cost her.

"I was ten the first time Mason raped me," she said, very calmly. Margot sat up a little straighter and folded her hands in her lap primly. "He was allowed to plead down to community service.

"That was the only time his actions resulted in charges, and then I believe it was only because I was hospitalized afterwards, and that attracted attention. I needed stitches, you see.

"He lost interest in sexual violence shortly before I hit puberty, and that was when he started using knives on me instead. I've gone to the police about that, and I've bled from new wounds for it more than once, though usually Mason found it funny.

"The last time was about three years ago, shortly after I had my son. Dr. Graham went with me; our thought was that I could not be dismissed as hysterical or a pathological liar if I had with me a psychiatrist who could confirm what I had to say. The officers did seem to listen to Will - to take him much more seriously than they ever took me." Both Margot and Will understand that this was not simply because he was a professional, and very good at talking people into doing what he wanted, but because he was a man. However, Margot did not say this on the stand. "And yet… Nothing came of it.

"It was the same, I understand, with the parents who came forward about what he had done with their children. Investigations never got off the ground, evidence was always lacking, charges never materialized. I can't imagine why not."

She paused, sniffed dismissively, and there was a bite of venom in her voice when she said, “Mason was always a strong supporter of the local law enforcement. I remember one Christmas when he bought the entire department state of the art body armor.

“I stopped trying after Mason showed me his special pigs,” Margot went on, and she told them about Mason stuffing her clothing full of things that pigs liked to eat, as though it were some strange scarecrow, and making her watch as they tore the thing apart.

Will could tell that the prosecutor didn’t really believe her, but that didn’t matter because most of the jury did.

“What happened to these monster pigs?” the man asked her, evidently demanding that she produce one to confirm her story, and Margot tilted her head to the side and regarded him and said calmly, “I had them sent to slaughter within hours of Mason’s body being discovered. It was one of the first things I did, even before calling the funeral parlor.”

Now, when Margot finally does speak, it is of nothing that happened in the courtroom.

“Do you remember,” she asks him, “the time that we went to that charity gala together, and you called Mason a ‘pigfucker’ in front of the visiting dignitaries?”

He looks towards her, wide-eyed with astonishment and grinning.

“Oh, *vividly* ,” Will says.

“That was after I broke things off with Judy - I was so worried about what might happen if Mason found out about her. She’d been accepted in her home - her family loved her - and she just didn’t understand what it was like to live in a constant state fear. I couldn’t stomach the idea of her learning.

“I remember,” Will said. His grip is tight on the steering wheel. He has decided that he knows where they are going.

“I hadn’t been out in months. I could see my entire life stretching out in front of me, nothing but terror and helpless rage and an endless procession of lonesome days and nights. But you wanted me to go to the dance with you - ‘just as friends.’”

“I believe I said ‘as friends,’” Will cuts in. “I’d never have reduced the idea of friendship with you with a ‘just,’ Margot.”

“I was suspicious of why you were so ready to cross that professional boundary.” Out of the corner of his eye, Will watches as Margot crosses her legs and smooths the creases on her pants legs. After a pause, she adds, “There’s a level on which I still feel that way.”

“You needed someone in your corner, and not just for an hour a week. I wanted to be that person for you.”

Margot goes on with the story without acknowledging his words, but Will sees that she finds his frankness at once unnerving and reassuring. “But we were at the gaila, and that old woman from… which charity was she with?”

“I don’t remember the organization either. It’s not really important, is it?”

“It’s not,” Margot agrees. “She cornered me, and she was going on and on about Mason’s work, how much good he was doing and how useful his contributions had been.

“I was used to hearing that type of thing - I could stomach it. I could smile and nod and pretend everything was fine. But I saw you getting paler and paler... You were so outraged that you were *shaking* - and I thought for a moment there that you might pass out. Then you just -”

“I lost my temper,” Will says, but he keeps his eyes carefully on the road so he won’t have to meet hers.

“No, you didn’t,” Margot tells him. “It wasn’t like you lost control or exploded. It was something different from that… you became so *cold* . I’d never seen you like that before.

“And then you said, ‘I guess even a pigfucker like Mason’s money spends.’

Margot sighs. “Half the people there knew exactly what Mason was like, but they pretended to be so scandalized anyway. Then you spent the rest of the evening going from person to person apologizing and trying to smooth things over, and you looked so upset and so shocked with yourself that you almost seemed on the verge of crying, and everyone said that it was fine, that maybe you’d just had too much to drink, or else they treated it as a joke that hadn’t quite hit its mark, and by the time it was all over everyone was trying to make *you* feel better.”

“I was terrified that it might get back to Mason and that you’d be the one to bleed for it,” he tells Margot. “I knew that I’d been a fool the instant it was out of my mouth.”

“You fixed it, though - if he ever heard about what you said it never came back to bite me.”

“I’m glad.” They are on the outer edge of the city now, the suburbs beginning to give away to woods and fields. Will remembers what it was like making this drive with Hannibal in the dark, his anticipation a tight thing curled inside of his chest.

“The thing is,” Margot goes on, “you had such a reputation as this sensitive, big-hearted philanthropist. But that night, watching you work the crowd, I started to see how much you put into building and maintaining that image.

“There were a couple of people still going around saying, ‘that just goes to show you that you should fear the nice ones,’ but no one actually took that to heart. They just figured that they had seen you at your worse in that moment, and that it didn’t go any deeper than that.”

“But you knew better,” Will says softly.

“That was when I really started to trust the way that you would get angry on my behalf during our sessions. Before that, I thought maybe it was just some kind of therapy technique - that it was all part of your job. But I saw that it was sincere, and raw, and maybe a little dangerous.”

“Only a little?” Will means for it to come across as a joke, but he hears the fragility in his own voice and he hates it.

Margot takes his words seriously. “You aren’t naturally gentle,” she tells him, watching the trees go by outside the windows. “Any softness in you will always be the product of you deliberately contorting yourself so that your sharp edges don’t come into contact with people who you care about.”

That Margot has allowed him to take her so far out into the country without raising complaints or concerns feels to Will like a vote of confidence - makes him hope that she isn't as frighten of him as he's feared after all.
He turns off the main road and into the state park. Will can feel the tension flowing off her body, but she doesn't tell him to turn around.

"You've known that about me for a long time," he says.

"For almost as long as we've known one another," she agrees.

They drive in silence for several minutes. When they come to the picnic grounds, Will pulls off the road and puts the car into park.

"This is where the two of you did it?"

"Yes," Will said, and sighs. "I had an electric lantern, and when the bright light shone on Hannibal the blood made his skin glow like red hot copper. It was beautiful."

He'd like to take time getting lost in the memory, but Margot interrupts him.

"Do you have any idea," she asks, "how hard it is for me to keep myself from resenting you?"

Will does not look at Margot. He faces forward, because he does not feel brave enough meet her eyes now. "I know," he says. "I'm sorry."

"Ever since I found out how easily killing comes to you, I keep trying to understand why, if you care about me as much as you say you do, it wasn't worth your time to kill Mason to stop him hurting me? Why do I owe this debt of gratitude to Hannibal instead, when he was a stranger to me?"

"It's not as simple as that."

"What isn't?"

"Any of it.

"I wanted him to kill him, Margot," he says, and swallows, trying without success to choke down his own rage for fear that she might feel herself the target of it. "Believe me - I wanted the sonofabitch bleeding under my knife. I wanted to draw screams from him until his voice gave out and his throat hemorrhaged so badly that he was choking on his own blood.

"I wanted that, Margot - for years. I wanted it so much that I could *taste* it."

"Then why didn't you do it?" she asks, and Will knows that there is no point in lying, but very little hope in her understanding the truth as he sees it, either.

"It was never Hannibal's intent, but he's stolen something vital from you that you will never be able to get back. You should have been the one to kill your brother, Margot. It would have benefitted you immensely if you'd been given the chance to find out what it's like to hurt the person who hurt you.

"I know, because it made all the difference in the world for me."

“Will…” Margot says with a sigh, but whatever the thought meant to follow it was dies unvoiced.

After a while, Will puts the car into drive and they head back to the city.

Chapter End Notes

So... turns out there's definitely going to be ANOTHER story in this series, but more on that later.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The jury foreman stands and says, “We, the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder, as charged in indictment number one,” his voice made as grim with the import of the pronouncement as it is awkward with the unfamiliar grandiosity of the phrasing, and Will’s heart lurches in his chest.

It does this regardless of the fact that he knew this would happen; it went without saying that this was the conclusion that they could be expected to reach - Hannibal had never contested his guilt.

What matters is what comes next, whether or not they have decided that Hannibal is too insane to be held accountable for his actions. But the foreman pauses before going on, and in that brief moment Will feels everything that matters to him hanging in the balance, entirely dependent upon what the man says next, and in that moment he dreams a short dream of failure and of hopeless and helpless desolation in the face of his own ineffectualness, the grief crowding in around his heart as he becomes convinced that the foreman will not say what he needs him to say.

Will’s fingertips claw at his knees.

He forgets how to breath.

Margot is a stoney presence beside him, her emotions locked away for her own safety.

Then the foreman says, “but not criminally responsible due to insanity,” and the sick thudding of Will’s heart becomes a giddy flutter instead.

He reminds himself forcefully to guard his face; it is fine if he appears vindicated or relieved, but they must not see how smug he feels in this moment, or his anticipation at moving forward into the next stage of his plan.

It won’t do to show how overjoyed he is.

The foreman reads through the list of the rest of Hannibal’s charges, and each is followed by rote with the same formal, “Guilty, but not criminally responsible, and Will waits, his hands folded in his lap and his expression a carefully calculated mask of what others might expect to see on the face of the character he is still playing.

When it is all done with, they take Hannibal from behind the defendant’s table and walk him up the center aisle of courtroom, past the gallery.

It takes Will by surprise - always before Hannibal has been seated at the table before they allow anyone into the gallery, and always he has been taken out only after the room has been cleared - and now, as he draws nearly close enough for Will to reach out and touch, Will feels his hand rising from his lap entirely unbidden, intent on doing just that as Hannibal passes by.

Margot snatches the hand from the air before it has risen more than a few inches. She enfolds it in her own hands as though seeking and giving comfort was from the beginning her only intention.

Will does not fight her, but he turns his head, nonetheless, to watch Hannibal go past him, and in the same instant Hannibal turns his head to look at Will.

Their eyes meet, for only a moment, and the ghost of a smile flickers across Hannibal's face. It is meant only for him, Will knows; to anyone else and everyone else it is a dim thing, barely perceivable if recognized as a smile at all, but Will knows how to read Hannibal's face and he knows how radiant that short-lived smile really is.

It reaffirms everything for Will - quells all of his fears and his uneasiness about what Hannibal feels for him now. Even after everything that has happened, he is still loved.

To be certain of that again galvanizes Will's resolve.

He goes home, and he goes over his plan once again, carefully checking it for flaws or blind spots.

Then Will calls an old friend.

When the man on the other end of the line answers, it as though Matthew has been waiting to hear from him all along.

Chapter End Notes

XD

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Margot has a bottle bourbon tucked under her arm when she lets herself into Will's house. She glances back out at the SOLD sign standing in the lawn as she latches the door behind herself.

Will has always tended to keep the place dim, the lighting calculated to emulate the cozy sort of golden hue that comes into the world at sunset, but the lamps have been packed away with everything else, and Margot's shadow stretches out tall along the wall as she make her way down the entry hall.

"Will?" she calls out before proceeding any further, and hears her voice reverberate strangely in the nearly empty house.

His voice comes back to her from the sitting room. "In here."

Margot ducks into the kitchen before she goes to him. The walls are bare, as they are throughout the house, and the table is gone along with the rest of the furnishings. There are some moving boxes left on the counter, though, neatly labeled with black marker, and Margot finds the one that holds the glasses and peels the cardboard flaps back to take out two tumblers.

Will is sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the fireplace, surrounded by half a dozen large file boxes. The light from the flames dances across his skin, and when Will looks up at her Margot sees that for the first time in a long while there is something bright and hopeful flickering in his eyes. The smile he gives her is uncomplicated.

Margot lowers herself down onto the floor beside him. She sets the glasses on the carpet and opens the bottle, while Will goes back to leafing through the stack of notebooks that rests beside him.

"Those are you patients' notes."

"Not my patients anymore," he says, almost absently. "I lost my license today, you know. I didn't fight it."

Margot looks more closely at the fire and sees the varnished document frames burning there. She can still make out most of Will's name on one of the curling pieces of vellum; he is casting off his diplomas, then, along with the suspended licence.

"I'm just going through my notes to make sure there isn't anything here that might get anybody in trouble," he goes on. "I'm careful about what I write down, but I didn't get a chance to go over everything before we left last time."

Margot holds the glass out to him, almost beneath his nose, and Will looks up at her long enough to flash a brief smile before he takes it.

"I've been trying to drink less," Will says, but there is an ironic note of self-deprecation in his voice as he says this, and he drains half the bourbon from his glass before he sits it down on the edge of the hearth.

Margot matches his pace, then surpasses it, watching Will work as she refills her glass. He has been sharp-edged and raw in his vulnerability, these last months, but now he is almost manic with anticipation and glee. His face twitches oddly as he pages through the notebooks, fractured grins that touch only one side of his mouth or the other shifting across his skin at random.

Margot thinks about what they said to one another a few nights before, on the the bluff where Mason died slow and ugly.

She knows that her question was unfair, that the logistics of getting away with killing someone as prominent as Mason was must have been nearly impossible. It was little more than dumb luck - or, considering what a mess has come of it, bad luck - that Mason happened to provide them with the opportunity when he did.

And she knows also that Will has not been as passive as she accused him of being - that he has made multiple efforts over the years to to cajole or goad Mason into giving Will a chance alone with him, even long before Thomas was born and they began to talk more seriously together about the need to get rid of her brother. Mason had always choose to interpret the invitations to hunting trips or boat outings as indicative of sexual interest on Will's part. It occurred to Margot at the time that Will might have intended to threaten Mason, or even to beat him up, though now it seems obvious that he'd hoped to stage an accident or disappearance.

But she knows as well how full of shit Will can be, the ways that he lies to himself so fervently that he comes to believe the lies he tells himself about himself, and then expects others to accept those lies at face value, too. Of course, she thinks, it's hard to blame him - most people do exactly that.

Margot doesn't doubt that he sincerely hoped that a chance would develop for her to kill Mason herself, and there is a wary corner of herself that is willing to entertain the idea that he might be right about it being beneficial for her. But she has also seen how uneasy he was with her knowing the truth about him, at least at first, and feels certain that his discomfort would have been considerably more acute if Hannibal hadn't given Will time to get used to being seen prior to Margot being brought in on his secrets.

And so, she believes Will hesitated - probably completely unconsciously - to kill Mason out of the fear that it would lead to Margot learning ugly truths about him. He needs so badly for her to be able to like and trust him; he couldn't stand the idea of losing her friendship.

Margot knows how much he benefits from being able to make her feel at ease, and she works hard to give him some of that now - to relax and have a good time, and to reclaim the old casual calm that just being around Will used to bring her.

It works, though only for a little while. The bourbon works its way into her system, making her muscles feel loose and relaxed, and Will is satisfied with his task, and Margot is happy to be here with him and certain in the knowledge that he feels the same way.

Will tears several pages from one of the notebooks carefully, and lays them in the fire. Then he says, "I've sold the family home as well."

"You've talked about doing that."

"It's all been liquidated and reallocated. A certain amount is going to the hounds' caretaker to keep them and her well provided for, and the same for the other staff. The rest is for the charities I talked about, remember?"

Margot inclines her head.

“It wasn’t right for me to hold onto it for as long as I have, anyway,” Will says, and when he meets her eyes she sees all of his self-loathing and righteous pride, stark on his face. “I don’t think the courts will be able to take any of it back, after Hannibal and I are gone.”

Dread leaks back into her belly, smothering the warmth of the bourbon there like water thrown over a hot coal. “When is it going to happen?”

He wets his lips as he studies her, and Margot can see that he wants to answer, but then he drops his eyes back to the notebook. “It’s better if you don’t know.” He pauses before adding, “It’s safer for you that way, Margot,” and she wonders if that is a threat.

“Will,” she says, “look at me, please.” And he does, but she cannot decode what is in his eyes now, as he regards her. She reaches for her glass without looking away from him, and drains it without breaking eye contact.

She keeps her voice steady as she speaks. “Now that you’ve gotten your way, how many people are going to die to pull of whatever it is you’re planning?”

“Nobody you know,” he says. “That’s the best I can promise you, Margot, I'm sorry for that.”

Will studies her. “And not you. You aren’t worried about that, are you?”

Her laugh is shaky but sincere. “Not in a million years.”

“But you’re having second thoughts now. Now that the first bit is done with, you’re wonder if you should have helped us. And you’re worried about how much responsibility you might incur for whatever happens next.”

She doesn’t bother to deny it.

What Will says next seems at first unrelated to the conversation.

“It’s good to be understood,” he says. “To really be seen and understood, all the way down to your bones. I never thought I wanted that, before Hannibal gave it to me.

“But I came so close to killing him for it - or at least, that’s what I told myself at the time. He found out about me, you see, and I didn’t know what else to do. I had him chained up in my basement for days after that…”

“*Jesus,* Will,” Margot says, the horror shocked out of her, because Hannibal had never mentioned anything about this, but he goes on as though she hasn’t spoken.

“And I kept telling myself, ‘You have to go do it. Finish your drink and then get it taken care of,’ but then I would have another drink, and another. And then I’d say, ‘Well, can’t do it tonight, I’ve fucked up my reaction time and he might get the better of me, best wait until I’ve slept this off…’

“At first I thought that when I did it to him - and I was sure that I was going to do it, Margot, there was absolutely no doubt in my mind - I’d do it just like the others. I told myself that the situation was what it was, and there was no point being sentimental over it if I could help it.”

He turns his head to watch the fire as he speaks. “But before very long I decided that I wouldn’t be able to take that - that I couldn’t stand seeing him seeing me hurting him - so I bargained with myself. I told myself that it didn’t have to be bad for him, that I could just shoot him while he was asleep, or that I could drug him so he’d go off into a quiet little sleep and never wake up again.

“I told myself that there were any number of ways to kill him without him knowing what was about to happen. And then I wouldn’t have to risk him judging me worse than he already was. I wouldn’t have to watch him looking at me with that wounded hangdog look he gets when he’s hurt or disappointed.

“And I told myself that he wouldn’t have to be scared, though honestly I’m not sure that he really ever was or if there was anything that I could have done to make him feel that way. He’s rock hard, Margot, especially when he gets stubborn. It’s uncanny - sometimes it scares me, how hard he can get when he wants to.

“I didn’t go through with it, of course. But I’d remember later, how I had planned these things, all the time I spent thinking about what would be the best way to do it, and I’d look down at him sleeping next to me I’d think about what I’d almost done and I’d just *burn* with shame. I’d watch his face while he was sleeping - Margot, his face is so open and content when he’s asleep, I couldn’t begin to describe it, and it’s being close to *me* that makes him like that, and I still can’t wrap my head around it - or I’d catch the adoring way he looks at me when he thinks I can’t see him, and I would despise myself.

“There’s nothing good about me, Margot, and I know it. I can do good things if I work at it - I’m real good at being good *to* people and *for* people, most of the time - but there is nothing good about what I really am.” He looks down at his hands, and in the red light of the fire Margot sees the shame burning in him. “But hurting someone who loves me that much - to have even contemplated betraying that love - it’s something else entirely. It’s reprehensible, and I’ve spent such a long time time tearing at myself for even considering it.

“But I’ve realized something, since he’d been gone. And that’s that I was lying to myself, the entire time.

“I didn't want to admit the way that love made me helpless to defend myself, because it frightened me - it scares me even now, how exposed Hannibal’s love makes me feel - but I never could have really killed him.

“As bad as I am, I don’t have that in me. That’s all there is to it.

“And it would be no more possible for me to hurt you. I need you to understand that.”

Will looks up her. “You love me, don’t you, Margot?” he asks, and when the answer catches in her throat, anxious, he smiles a knowing smile, one that is only slightly marred by sadness and says, “That’s okay, Margot. Don’t worry about it - I know you do.

“You and Tommy, you’re all the real family I’ve ever had - the only family I’ve ever wanted.”

“I feel the same way about you,” Margot tells him.

“I know you do,” Will says, and then he swallows hard. “So if you want to end all of this - stop it before it goes any further, turn me in, whatever else you might be thinking about - I won’t be able keep you from doing that. It’s not in me to force your silence.”

And Margot believes that - in her heart and in her gut and all the way down into her bones.

So she takes his hand up in her own and she asks, “What do you need from me to make sure this works?”

Chapter End Notes

I've been wanting to write this one for MONTHS and I am honestly so pleased about how it turned out.

Hope you guys have as much fun reading it as I did writing it. <3

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The orderly stands outside of the glassed-in quiet room, bouncing on the balls of his feet and fidgeting with excess energy. Hannibal makes a half-hearted effort to focus on what Chilton is saying to him, but his eyes keep wanting to shift back to track the young man's movements.

Hannibal has been aware of the orderly's interest in him almost from the start, though this is the first day since Hannibal's arrival at the BSHCI that he's been the one to handcuff him and take him from his cell.

"Was your father a violent man?" Chilton asks.

"My father," Hannibal says slowly, "was brilliant. He was the first man in his family to have the opportunity to learn how to read, and given that opportunity he excelled. He could speak and read four different languages, though in English his pronunciation was at times inventive.

"He taught children reading and ran the library, which served our town and the three neighboring villages. There were not as many books there as one might have desired, but he saw that they were put to good use, and went to great lengths to obtain more."

It's evident that the answer is not satisfying to Chilton, but Hannibal goes on for his own edification; he has not thought about these things in years. "He read theory for his own pleasure - Marx and Engels. And Lenin, of course. Selections of Lenin's works were available at every peasant library at every corner of the USSR, even if they had little else."

"Then he was a communist," Chilton says. "A proponent of revolution."

The man understands nothing, Hannibal thinks, and it the disdain at his lack of understanding that drives Hannibal to tell him things that he can't possibly grasp. Will, he knows, would have no personal frame of reference for any of this, but he would try. He always has before.

"He was a teacher and an aspiring intellectual," Hannibal corrects him. "And he understood how he had come to have what opportunities were open to him, and hoped to see more improvements for his children. As intelligent as he was, he understood almost at once that we had the potential to eclipse him."

"We? You had siblings."

He speaks as though he has made some great discovery. Hannibal wonders why he has not bothered to read Dr. Bloom's thin file on him. He ignores the question.

"My father was partial to ancient military histories, as well. Obviously." He pauses, giving Chilton an opportunity to look semi-competent, but even such low-hanging fruit escapes him. "And American socialist realism novels."

Hannibal remembers his fascination with his father's ancient copy of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, the hardships of the Lithuanian family who had come to America to find better lives and who were

met only with disappointment and exploitation. He'd been eight when he read that, two years off from the loss of everything he cared for and everyone who cared for him, and his brain hooked on the accounts of workers slipping to fall into massive cauldrons of rendering lard, how their bodies would never be recovered, but were rendered along with the pig fat, the finished product sold to unsuspecting wives and mothers.

Was it a premonition that provoked such a horrified, thrilling fascination with that detail, some early awareness of the shape that his fate would take, or had his fixation somehow brought it all down upon himself, and on Mischa?

He wonders now if it was anger at his father for dying - for leaving the two of them alone, when he was still so young and so poorly equipped to protect her - that lead him to opt for immigration to this bastion of capitalism, or if he had simply needed to get as far away from Mischa and what he'd done as possible.

It occurs to Hannibal that, should Will be successful in freeing him, they will certainly need to flee the country, and he wonders now where they will go.

"Was my father violent?" Hannibal repeats. "No."

"But, of course, someone molested you," Chilton says, and it is not a question. "Was it your father?"

Hannibal blinks, several times in quick secession. Stunned, he says, "Why would you assume such a thing?"

"Why else would you take Mason's actions so personally unless you empathized with his victims?"

Hannibal's eyes turn towards the orderly, seeking confirmation of the outrageousness of this line of questioning, but of course the young man can't hear what they are saying, and in any case is pointedly not looking at them.

He is almost too astonished to be angry. "It doesn't take personal experience to understand that raping children is wrong," he says. "Surely, that's not a question of empathy."

"You were driven by moral indignation, then," Chilton says, as though he has made a breakthrough.

Chilton has a very specific narrative about Hannibal in mind, one which he aspires to put into a book, but in many ways the story he is trying to tell reminds Hannibal more closely of Will than of himself; moral outrage fueling an unbridled anger that often outstripes his ability to direct it, and a yen to prevent suffering that is almost as strong as the desire to inflict it, all of it tangling together into a profoundly difficult knot.

It's not entirely Chilton's fault that he is confused in this way; it is, after all, how Hannibal encouraged Chilton to see him prior to and during the trial, but now that the narrative is no longer needed to shield him Hannibal feels uneasy under its shade.

Sometimes he worries about his own motives, wonders if his inclination towards violence is somehow shallow or less worthy in comparison to Will's, however less frequently he might have exercised it. Hannibal is troubled sometimes by the fear that Will does not fully understand how different they are, in this regard.

The awareness of what a poor fit he is to the narrative that Chilton is trying to force him into is goading.

“I was driven,” he says in a bored voice, “by curiosity to learn just how much physical agony and existential terror I am capable of inflicting on another human being. And as it turns out, I have a great talent for it.”

Chilton makes a decent effort at seeming unimpressed. “You’ve been extremely difficult since being transferred here.” He is not, all things considered, that bad at keeping the fear from his face, if only because he hides it so well behind indignation and a shabby mantle of authority, but Hannibal can smell him sweat. “Why are you refusing to take your medication?”

Hannibal says, “Because I am not psychotic.”

“You’re not qualified to evaluate that.”

“I might say the same of you,” Hannibal tells him, and allows the vein of mockery that has run through this entire conversation to become blatant.

Chilton leans back in his chair. “I’m not someone who you want for a nemesis. I can make things extremely difficult for you.”

“Nemesis,” Hannibal repeats, and he shakes his head and smiles with his teeth. “That’s... ambitious. Are you this fond of theatrics with your other patients?”

Chilton smiles back at him. The expression is simultaneously smug in its power and insecure in its ability to cow Hannibal with that authority. Then he stands and leaves the quiet room, closing the door carefully behind himself, and Hannibal is left behind with his wrists chained to the table.

When Chilton has gone past him, the orderly turns and looks directly at Hannibal, and Hannibal knows that he is being seen and evaluated, though there is an uneasy sense that the young man does not necessarily like what he has to see.

He smirks at Hannibal, then he turns and goes away too.

Hannibal has, in the short time he’s been here, seen the way disobedient inmates are sometimes left locked in the therapy cages for hours on end, and then severely reprimanded for pissing on the floor.

He understands that he is being punished in a similar manner now; he assumes that he will be left here for the night, a conclusion that seems to be confirmed for him when he finds himself still tethered to the table when the lights go down.

The shackles keep him in a slightly stooped position, and after a few hours his shoulders begin to stiffen and ache. He closes his eyes and remembers that night at the hotel, after he and Will killed the trucker, the way that Will had run him a hot bath and then perched himself on the edge of the tub to lean over the water and rub Hannibal’s shoulders. There hadn’t been an ounce of tension in his body at the time, and Hannibal focuses on the heat of the water and the feel of Will’s hands kneading his muscles, and before very long the pain his shoulders recedes.

The door to the quiet room clicks open, and Hannibal hears someone cross the room and slide down into the chair across from him.

Fingers drum impatiently on the metal surface of the table, but Hannibal makes him wait as he lingers for a few more moments with the memory.

Then he says, “Hello, Matthew,” and opens his eyes.

Matthew leans forward over the table, his head cocked to the side and his grin crooked. He says, “Hi.”

“Will sent you.”

Matthew’s grin widens. Hannibal fights the desire to tilt his own head to make that asymmetric smile look a bit straighter.

“Yeah, that’s right. Doc G. called me up and asked if I could do him a favor.”

“It was good of you to agree.”

“Well, what are friends for?”

Hannibal replays in his memory everything Will has told him about the young man. “Will thinks very highly of you,” Hannibal tells him. He says this because it is evident that Matthew is easily influenced by praise, but it is also the truth.

Matthew preens, flattered and proud, and for an instant Hannibal sees the vulnerability that so endeared him to Will when he was a boy.

But he isn’t a child now, and Hannibal understood at first glance that he carries all the potentialities of a killer, though certainly Matthew is not as experienced than Will, and probably even less so than Hannibal himself.

Still, the shackles that bind him to the table feel suddenly heavier; the weight of unease.

“I’m glad,” Matthew says. “Doc G. helped me a lot, when I was younger. He taught me how to stay out of trouble.”

Somehow, Hannibal had expected something different of Matthew, but he supposes that he ought to have weighed Will’s account against the type of personality traits that he knows Will has a tendency to be drawn towards. Will fell in love with him, after all, so he supposes that it should come as no surprise that this is the type of person who, as a barely grown boy, might have provoked in Will affection and protectiveness.

“Don’t do things that other people will have too much difficulty understanding,” Matthew tells him, and though there is a strange cadence to his words, perhaps the hint of a mild speech impediment, Hannibal hears the echo of Will in his words. “And if you can’t help it, don’t let yourself get caught.”

Then he says, “Guess you didn’t learn that lesson, huh? Hell of a mess you’ve gotten yourself into.”

It’s a mistake, Hannibal can tell, not to let Matthew lord that over him for a while, but he is impatient. “What did Will ask you to tell me?” he says.

“To tell you?” Matthew repeats, offended. “I’m not just a messenger boy, you know. I’m more important than that - my role is more important. This entire thing hinges on me.”

Hannibal bites down on his annoyance. “Clearly, Will has a great deal of faith in you,” he says, but he is wondering already how much faith he ought to have in this plan, whatever it is, if Matthew is really as vital a part in it as he says.

Matthew stands up.

The way he struts as he circles around Hannibal invoke a malicious association between the yard roosters he and Will raised, and he wonders distantly what has become of their chickens.

He is to Hannibal’s back now, and Hannibal can’t see him, but he feels Matthew’s eyes on his body.

“I didn’t expect you to be so old,” he comments. “What’s Doc G. see in you, anyway?”

Something clicks into place for Hannibal. *He’s jealous,* he realizes. The understanding puts him on edge.

“How much do you weigh?”

“Why are you asking?” Hannibal says, defensive.

“Doc G. wants to know,” Matthew says, as he circles around on Hannibal’s other side and comes back to face him again.

“Why?” Matthew gives him a crooked, mocking smile. He doesn’t answer, but Hannibal after a moment's thought Hannibal begins to see the answer.

On the night that he and Will had argued about his weight, Hannibal was at about 175 pounds, which was as heavy as he’d ever been, and though Will had done all that could be done to mitigate the shame and self-disgust that Hannibal felt after confessing what happened to Mischa, in the weeks that followed his appetite had been off and he’d lost about ten pounds before leveling out. After he was shot, he’d dropped about ten percent of his total body weight, which was to be expected following such a severe injury with such a long recovery time, but he’d lost at least another twenty pounds while he was at the prison.

It is impossible for Hannibal not to notice how muscular Matthew is; his neck alone is like a tree trunk, so thick that it makes his head look rather small on his body. That kind of muscle is mainly for show, and as diminished as he is Hannibal believes himself to be in possession of all the strength and speed and vicious insight necessary to take him down. But he also knows that when Matthew looks at him he sees something shabby and worn out, a poor specimen compared to his own youthful vigor, and that this makes him feel superior to Hannibal in a way that has the potential to combine in ugly ways with his jealousy.

“One thirty-three,” he admits, and the feeling is complicated. He’s managed to gain something back over the last few weeks, and until just now he’d been proud of that, but he knows that he is still severely underweight.

Matthew shakes his head in pitying wonder at the number. “Human beings aren’t meant to be in cages,” he says, and Hannibal is taken aback by the sincerity of his words, when everything up to this point has carried an edge of mockery. “Some people can adapt to it - small people with small minds and small desires can learn to live in small cages - but it does terrible things to those of us who are meant to soar.

“Don’t worry, though. We’ll get you out soon.”

Hannibal is surprised by how reassuring that is; how much it makes him want to warm up to Matthew, hideously obnoxious brat that he may be.

He considers for a moment, then he says, “You’re going to stage a medical crisis.”

He can tell that Matthew is disappointed that he’s guessed. He makes Hannibal wait for a long time before he inclines his head in affirmation.

Chapter End Notes

Just for reference, the internet says that Mads weighs 181 pounds.

Chapter 20

Back when Matthew was still his patient, Will often found himself feeling the same way about the boy as he imagined he might have felt for a kid brother, if he'd had one; a foolish, at times troublesome presence in his life, but one whose antics nonetheless amused - someone he felt extremely protective towards.

Now, though, Will's feelings have begun to shift toward something paternal, and he supposes that makes sense; it is evident that during the years since they've last been face to face Will has matured considerably more than Matthew.

Matthew still feels like a boy to him, and Will can see that he's still nursing the baby crush he'd had on Will when he was a teenager.

That's alright; it makes him feel like a cad, but he isn't above using that to get what he needs.

He remembers the week that Matthew stayed at his place, right after he'd been released from the State Hospital. The boy tried to make dinner for Will one night, but the task got away from him and Will came home to chaos and a kitchen full of smoke.

Matthew was flippant and full jokes, a mask for how worried he was about being in trouble. Will assured him that he wasn't angry, and then he took from the freezer the last of the meat left over from his most recent kill, a stranger he'd snatched up entirely at random when the strain of completing his dissertation had threaten to send him spiraling, and placed it in a basin of warm water to defrost quickly.

Then he brought the mess under control and gave Matthew some vegetables to chop. He wasn't especially efficient at the task - the kid was easily distracted - but there was no great hurry.

The food at the State Hospital was bland when it wasn't repellent, and so Will kept things unchallenging; pan fried "pork chops" and roast winter vegetables with sliced apples, with apple pie for dessert.

"Meat taste funny," Matthew said, when they sat down to eat, and Will quelled the tumble of delight and anxiety in his chest to say nonchalantly, "It's feral hog. Their diet makes them taste different from domestic pigs," and Matthew accepted that easily.

It was the only time that Will ever shared that type of meal with another person, right up until the dinner with Hannibal that went so wrong. It meant a great deal to him, then and now.

Now, Will hurries anxiously to the door in response to Matthew's knock and opens it to allow him to slip into the hotel room.

Will wants to demand information about Hannibal at once, but he knows that if Matthew's ego isn't tended to properly he can get obnoxious. "How are you?" he asks, therefore. "I'm glad you're back. I've been waiting all day to see you."

Matthew is still in his uniform. They're leaving a chain of witnesses a mile long, and when this is all over it will be obvious that Matthew was an accomplice. Will hasn't figured out exactly what to

do about that yet - he thinks maybe they will need to take him along with them when they bolt, at least until they find some promising place for Matthew to start a new life.

He has not, however, broached the topic with Matthew; it will be better, Will believes, to beg forgiveness than ask permission. Matthew has approached the thing at once as a lark and a serious responsibility that he is proud to have shouldered for Will, and Will doubts that anything as dull as possible legal repercussions will make him back out, but he doesn't want to chance it. None of this will work without Matthew's help.

"Great, Doc G.," Matthew says, and when he smiles crookedly Will's own face mirrors the expression. Will can't help it; he likes him. "Long day, though, since I had to stay after to get a shot at talking to your guy friend. Can I jump in the shower?"

Will is desperately impatient, but he doesn't let it show. "Sure."

He wants to pace while Matthew is in the shower, but he worries that he'll be heard. He forces himself to sit at the end of one of the queen beds instead. His fingers drum against the quilt impatiently. The new residents moved into his old house three days ago, and since then Will has been here waiting fretfully for the final pieces of his plan to fall into place.

When Matthew comes out of the bathroom, he is wearing nothing but a towel. He's showing off, Will knows, as he parades across the room and sits on the bed opposite to Will. He wants Will to notice how built he is. Matthew has always been a bit like that; Will is careful to do nothing to encourage him, and ignores him now, but otherwise he doesn't pay it much mind.

Other things are weighing on him, anyway, and Will can't wait any longer. "How was he?"

"Skinny," Matthew says, "and sort of gruff. But he said that you said that you think the world of me."

"I do, Matt. You're a great friend, doing all of this for me." Will means this, sincerely, but it is hard for him to focus on Matthew's need for positive reinforcement when so much else is on his mind. He tries to turn the conversation. "Did you get his weight?"

"Yeah. One forty-five."

That's more than Will expected. He supposes that he'd been so panicked about Hannibal's health and wellbeing that he'd imagined he was thinner than he really is, and he scolds himself internally for being so melodramatic.

Outloud he says, "Okay. Good. And you weren't rude about asking?"

"Nah. I know you said he was sensitive about that."

"Good. Thank you," Will says. He stands and opens the bottom dresser drawer, where he has stored his trusty copy of *The Guide to Essential Drugs* and an extensive collection of pharmaceuticals.

He checks and then double checks the dosage tables against Hannibal's weight, then he triple checks the amount with an online database.

Will is good at drugging people - he's never had someone fail to wake up after he knocked them out - but he worries. The fear nags at him from a distant corner of his brain as he gives Matthew the

pills.

“When can we make this happen?” Will asks, and hears his own voice quaver with urgency.

“Tomorrow afternoon, if you’re ready,” Matthew says easily. “You’ve got the other prop you talked about?”

Will nods and goes to the mini fridge to take out a small paper sack. Inside of it is a plastic container that holds about ten ounces of pig’s blood. Will picked it up at a specialty grocer’s earlier that day, and now he hands it to Matthew.

Matthew looks into the bag and makes a face. “People really eat this,” he says. “Can you believe it?”

“People eat all sorts of things,” Will says, almost absently. “Make sure he understands this is pig’s blood, please.”

“What else would it be?” Matthew asks, and the conspiratorial glint in Matthew’s eye might mean that he’s guessed more about Will than Will’s told him, but it might also just be Matthew being Matthew. “Says ‘pork blood’ right on the container.”

And Will, who’d considered bleeding himself for the cause again before he realized that store-bought pig’s blood was a simpler option, as well as one less likely to upset Hannibal, deflects the question. “Thank you, Matthew. You’re saving my life here.”

“Don’t mention it, Doc G. Anything for you.” A ghost of unease floats across Will’s mind, but before he can grab the wisp to examine its origins, Matthew distracts him by saying, “I owe you, don’t I?”

Will smiles. “Let’s not think of it that way, alright? This isn’t anyone paying back debts. It’s friends looking out for one another.”

“Sure. I like that,” Matthew says.

He goes back into the bathroom to get dressed, and Will lays back on the bed and works on taking deep, calming breathes. Anticipation makes his heart thud unevenly, but he is not as nervous as he expected to be at this stage.

He believes that he has everything under control.

Chapter 21

Matthew stands in front of Hannibal's cell.

"You're sick," he tells Hannibal in a low whisper. "Something in your guts didn't heal right, and you've hemorrhaged."

He hands Hannibal a plastic container, and though it is sealed Hannibal can tell by scent that it is blood. The plastic is sticky with the residue of a label that someone has peeled off from its lid.

Intellectually, Hannibal knows that it is almost certainly from an animal - that Will wouldn't give him anything different if he could at all avoid it - but not knowing for sure makes his anxiety spike.

He considers asking Matthew where the blood came from, but hesitates to open a line of conversation that might tell him more than he ought to know about Will. And maybe even more than that, he doesn't believe that Matthew will tell him the truth.

"You'll put some around your mouth," Matthew instructs. "And I'll pool the rest on the floor near your face. It will look like you were puking blood, and you'll be unresponsive when they find you. It will *really* freak out anyone who sees it, and they'll send an ambulance."

"I see," Hannibal says. It's late, and his cell is fairly isolated - the last in a series of six that run along one side of the wall - but he keeps his voice low. "It's a good plan."

"Doc G. gave me these," Matthew says, and passes a small plastic bag of pills to Hannibal. "They'll knock you out and slow your heart and respiration. When you wake up again, you'll be a free man."

"Will's sharp, isn't he?" Hannibal says. "Coming up with something like this." He is suspicious already, but he wants to give Matthew a chance to back away from whatever he might be thinking of doing; there is enough about the young man that reminds him of Will and of himself to make Hannibal want to like him. "I'd hate to get on his bad side, wouldn't you?"

Matthew's smile is the shape of a fishhook, and just as sharp, and in that moment Hannibal decides that he has absolutely no intention of allowing himself to be rendered helpless and unconscious in this man's presence.

Hannibal places the pills in his mouth, allowing Matthew to see him do it, then he turns and goes to the sink to fill a glass of water. Instead of swallowing the water down, when he brings the glass to his lips he allows the pills to slip from his mouth and down into the glass. Then he empties the glass into the sink, and checking covertly to make sure they have all gone down the drain, he puts the cup back in its place.

He's not sure how long Matthew might expect the pills to take to start working - his only experience with these things is the injection that Will gave him, long ago - but he guesses that it should be at least ten minutes before he starts to get wozy.

Hannibal paints his chin and the inside of his mouth with the blood, trying not to grimace at the taste, then he lays down on the floor of the cell and curls in around himself, as though in pain.

Matthew lets himself into the cell and pours the rest of the blood out onto the floor. He isn't as good at painting a picture with blood patterns as Will is, but Hannibal is confident that anyone who looks in on the scene will assume that he fell on the way to the toilet and couldn't get up again.

Matthew waits about twenty minutes - giving the drugs a chance to work, Hannibal supposes - then he raises the alarm. After that, things begin to happen fairly quickly.

When the EMTs lean over him, Hannibal lays very still and focuses on slowing his own heart rate. Hannibal allows his muscles to go loose and pliant as the EMTs straighten his body out and lift him onto the stretcher. Sanitary wipes clean some of the blood away from his month, and an oxygen mask is slipped over his face in the same moment that one of the other EMTs attaches a pulse monitor to his finger.

Hannibal does not open his eyes to look at the readout, but he has always been able to exercise a great deal of control of his own heart rate, and he knows from his own count that it will say something close to sixty beats a minute, just short of dangerous bradycardia. He is pleased with himself for this; the drugs weren't necessary at all - he's fully capable of playing out his role in the plan on his own.

When the EMT leans over to strap him to the stretcher, Hannibal expands his chest and holds his arms just slightly above the surface of stretcher. The woman has not been trained for facilities like the BSHCI; she straps him down for his own safety rather than to restrain him, and doesn't notice these little ways in which he has won himself extra wiggle room, nor does she tighten the straps past the point of comfort.

Hannibal is concerned that someone may come over to check her work, but no one does. Matthew, whom he can sense hoovering at the edge of these proceedings, is of course confident that Hannibal has been drugged into unconsciousness, and any other BSHCI employees who might be looking on doubtlessly believe Hannibal to be actively dying.

It's a strange feeling to have the EMT's hands on him, knowing how likely it is that she will be dead soon. Hannibal wonders if he will be the one to kill her, and if so what that will feel like.

They roll him out to the ambulance, and though he keeps his eyes closed Hannibal listens closely to what is happening around him. Matthew and one of the male EMTs, whom Hannibal can distinguish from the other by the scent of his aftershave, get in the back with Hannibal.

It is a long drive, and for a while uneventful, and behind his closed eyelids Hannibal plays out a happy fantasy where everything goes exactly to plan; the EMTs are captured or killed easily, and Matthew plays out his role as Will intended, and when the rear doors to the ambulance swing open Will is there, and Hannibal rises from the stretcher and closes the distance between himself and his surprised lover in three quick steps, sweeping Will up into his arms to press his body against Hannibal's own. Will does not cry often, and he has always struggled to avoid doing so in front of Hannibal, but in Hannibal's imagination he cries, from happiness and relief and but mainly guilt, and Hannibal holds him for as long as they can dare to wait, and when Will has regained some degree of calm Hannibal tells him that there is nothing that needs forgiveness, but that he forgives Will nonetheless.

It's a lovely dream, but Hannibal knows that it will not happen like this, and beneath the sheet that covers his body Hannibal's hands work to remove the restraints.

Chapter 22

Will pulls the car over to the side of the isolated stretch of road. His cell phone's GPS is set to track the movements of Matthew's phone, and he watches the map on the screen until it tells him that Matthew and the ambulance are about two miles away.

He moves the car, leaving it parked diagonally across the center of the road, so that it blocks the majority of both lanes. Will flips on the hazard lights and gets out of the car. The ambulance is close now - Will can hear the sirens - and he circles around the car to place it between himself and the ambulance. When it comes into sight, Will raises one arm in greeting, as though trying to flag it down.

They don't stop, of course, but the driver is forced to slow to a crawl to go around on the shoulder, and when this happens Will raises his gun and shoots him.

Even as the ambulance is rolling to a stop, the sound of Will's gun discharging is followed by the muffled sound of one gunshot and then another from inside the ambulance, and Will knows that Matthew has killed the EMT that was riding with him in the back.

There is a third paramedic in the passenger seat, and Will circles around the front of the ambulance and points the gun at her.

"Out," he says, gesturing with a jerk of his chin in case she can't hear him, but she is frozen solid with terror.

Keeping the gun trained on her, Will comes around and yanks the passenger door open. She shies away and gives a weak scream.

"Out," he says again, and pulls back the hammer to make his point. When the gun clicks she flinches and raises her hands as though to shield herself, but makes no move to do as he's said.

Will sighs. That Hannibal is literally inches away from him is something that he is acutely aware of, and he is nearly frantic to go to him, but for Margot's sake he is trying to limit the body count as much as he can, so he pitches his voice to coaxing.

"Come on, now," he says, gentle but firm. "I don't want to shoot you, I know that you were here to help him, but I'm in a hurry right now. You come out now and I won't have to kill you."

The EMT stumbles coming down the steps from the ambulance, and Will catches her by the shoulder before she can fall. "Now listen to me," he says, as he steers her towards the grass. "You're probably going to have a hard time with this later on, and I don't want you trying to manage it by yourself. Get yourself a good therapist, alright?

"Kneel down, please," he adds, and at first she locks her knees and refuses, but Will presses down hard on her shoulder and her legs fold under her, and once she is on her knees he coldcocks her across the side of the head with the gun.

He bends down to make sure that she is unconscious, and turns her on her side so she will be at no risk of strangling should the concussion cause her to vomit, and then he straightens and turns back towards the ambulance.

That’s when Matthew begins to scream.

Will runs.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will opens the rear door of the ambulance and his eyes catch on movement as an uncapped syringe rolls across the floor towards him.

He looks up.

Hannibal is awake and on his feet, and in that moment Will does not have time to consider the how or why of this, because Matthew pinned against him, one of Hannibal's hands clutching Matthew's bicep while the other holds his right arm twisted behind his back. The shoulder of that arm bulges strangely, and Will can tell that it has been dislocated.

"Doc G.," Matthew says. "Will - help me. He's -" and Hannibal wrenches his arm harder and Matthew howls. Will watches agony draw his features wide, the eyes bulging and mouth opening hugely to let the pain out, and Will looks inside himself to try to understand what it is that he is feeling, but can find no answer.

Will shifts his eyes up to Hannibal, taking in the bloody nose and the the rapid rise and fall of his chest, but Will can't read Hannibal's gaunt face anymore than he can decode his own emotions. The roar of falling water fills Will's head.

Climbing into the ambulance, Will bends and picks the needle up carefully, seeing as he does so that the plunger has not been depressed. It is full of a clear liquid.

"What is this?" he asks, speaking to himself outloud as he stares at it.

He looks back up at them, and when he meets Matthew's desperate eyes everything comes together. It hits Will like a gutpunch.

"What is this?" he says again, and he hears the high ragged edge in his own voice, but Matthew doesn't answer.

It doesn't matter. Will understands now.

He glances up at Hannibal, and his face is easier to read now, and Will takes what he sees there and uses it to turn his own heart cold against Matthew.

"You were going to use this on him," Will says. "You wanted to make me think that I fucked up the dosage - that I killed him. Did you think that I would run away with you instead…?"

There are things screaming inside of Will, terror of what might have been waiting for him when he opened those doors, but right now the noise is of little consequence.

Will feels entirely calm when he holds the needle up and asks, "What's going to happen when I use this on you, Matthew?"

Will hadn't imagined it possible for Matthew's eyes to get any larger. "Doc G. Please. Listen -" Matthew says, but can't seem to find anything else to follow up with. His eyes dart frantically,

looking for some distraction or excuse. He strains against Hannibal's grasp, despite the way that it hurts him to do so, but Hannibal might as well be made of steel for all the good it does him.

"Please don't," he says at last, and Will is curious to see the way in which Matthew's cunning has failed him in this extremity.

Matthew has come to the end of his clever words and sly tricks, and there is nothing left but to finish it. Will steps closer to him. A spasm of anger escapes into Will's hands, and he opens Matthew's shirt with a sharp tug that sends buttons pinging against the walls of the ambulance, but he is in control of himself again when he pulls the fabric down from Matthew's shoulder, and does so without violence.

The cords of Matthew's neck stand out starkly as he strains to break away from Hannibal's inexorable grip. Will can see the hammering of Matthew's blood in the artery that runs below his ear, and his sense of serenity falters and then starts to fade.

Matthew begins to thrash his head wildly, and Hannibal leans back to avoid being struck in the jaw by the back of his head. It is the only concession - the only visible acknowledgement - that he has made to Matthew's efforts to free himself.

Will feels the rapid pounding of his own heart as he waits for Matthew to tire himself out. When he's still again, his head drooping down exhaustedly on his neck, Will says, "Matthew? Look at me."

Matthew does. He raises his eyes to Will, and they are glassy and very round. "Please," he says again, and his voice is very small, and Will sees in him the boy that he was, and his mind turns to his own son and the two pictures overlap and blur, and he wants to tear at his own skin because he knows that every part of what is happening now is his own fault.

"You shouldn't have tried to hurt him," Will says, and gently he sinks the needle into the thick muscle at the side of Matthew's chest, a few inches below his armpit, and presses down on the plunger until the syringe is empty. Whatever was inside of it will work quickly there.

He takes the needle out and sits it carefully on the vacant stretcher, and then he turns back and meets Matthew's eyes. The wounded dread in there is almost unfathomable.

Matthew is breathing hard - hyperventilating - and with his shirt open Will can see the rapid rise and fall of his chest, but all of that is only because of the fear.

"I didn't want to be alone," Matthew says, breathlessly, and there is something rueful to the words and to the set of his mouth as he speaks them, despite his terror.

Will doesn't answer. He has nothing to say.

They wait for it to happen, the two of them, Matthew knowing what is to come while Will can only guess. Hannibal is not a part of what is happening now, and he seems to Will to be very far away.

When the drug makes it to Matthew's heart his entire body jerks, the muscles suddenly rigid, and the force of it is for the first time nearly enough to shake Hannibal off. He convulses, but only briefly.

Matthew doesn’t die right away, but after that the brightness goes out of his eyes and he doesn’t try to speak again. He blinks quickly, trying without success to focus on Will's face.

“Let him go,” Will tells Hannibal, and when he does Matthew begins to slide bonelessly downward. Will catches him and supports him in his arms as he lowers himself and Matthew to the floor.

He holds Matthew’s hand until it’s over with, but Will doesn’t think that Matthew knows he’s there.

Will feels Hannibal’s hand close over his shoulder. The touch is firm, devoid of any uncertainty, and when Will reaches up to take the hand in his own Hannibal helps him to his feet.

They go, leaving the ambulance and everything it contains behind.

Chapter End Notes

Been waiting for a while to do this one, and now that it's done I feel like people will feel strongly about it, but I am not sure in precisely which way....

Feeling strange about it and hoping that I did not disappoint.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When the two of them are in the car and the car is rolling, Hannibal turns to Will and says, “We need to talk about what just happened.”

“No, actually. We don’t." Will speaks without taking his eyes from the road. His mouth is drawn in a thin line, but Hannibal can see the faint quivering of his chin. “We absolutely do not.”

“You killed a patient - someone who you knew and cared about. I know that wasn’t easy for you.” Hannibal understands that a large part of why he is alive to be having this conversation now - why he didn’t die in Will’s basement over a year ago - stems from Will’s disquiet at the idea of doing deliberate harm to someone under his personal care. Were this not the case, Hannibal knows that he wouldn’t have survived long enough to force Will to concede that the love that Hannibal feels for him is real, nor to convince Will to try his best at reciprocating it. “You’ve told me that is something that you never wanted to do.”

“He wasn’t my patient. I don’t have patients anymore - I have you, Hannibal. You’re what counts now, and I mean to protect you from any and every goddamned thing that tries to take you away from me again.”

The fierceness in his voice, the sincere devotion of it, pleases Hannibal, but he does not allow himself to be distracted from the fact that Will is on the verge of imploding, whether or not he realizes it. “Will...”

“Are you worried about me?” Will asks, and Hannibal hasn’t heard this kind of strain in Will’s voice since the basement. He turns his head to try to smile at Hannibal, and the expression looks like it’s been drawn on with a knife. “I’m absolutely fine, Hannibal. Honestly. Don’t worry about me.

“I didn't kill a patient. I just got rid of a problem,” and though Hannibal can tell that Will is reaching for the shelter of a self-righteous flavor of cruelty, his voice has a sullen, aching note to it.

To Hannibal, the anger is as gratifying as it is alarming. It is, he recognizes, at least in part a sort of apology, this refusal to express distress at having killed someone who meant to kill Hannibal; he understands that to Will the idea of acknowledging that pain feels like a betrayal, but he fears that might happen if he insists on trying to bury it.

“He loved you,” Hannibal says. “You can’t hide from how that makes you feel.”

“‘Let’s talk about how that makes you feel,’” Will mocks, suddenly vicious. “Stop trying to play therapist with me, Hannibal. You aren’t any good at it.”

The wounded, bitter disappointment that Hannibal is feeling now carries all sorts of dangerous potentialities, he knows, and in his lap his hands ball into fists. He looks out the window and focuses on keeping his own anger in check, but his eyes sting.

Silence grows, and in it Will's shamed sense of dread blooms. It has a scent, that desperate fear stink, and Hannibal thinks that he might choke on it.

"I fucked up," Will says at last, and Hannibal can tell how hard he is struggling to keep his voice matter-of-fact rather than pleading. "I knew… I knew how Matthew was, and I knew how he felt about me, but I never thought that he would -" Will swallows with an audible click. "I thought he was my friend."

Hannibal understood from the instant that he recognized Matthew as a threat that helping Will to forgive himself for failing to do the same would be a long, difficult and painful process, that in his guilt Will's instincts would be tear at himself while lashing out at any efforts to comfort him, but he wishes now that Will would allow himself to cry. It would be easier for them both if he would just cry.

Instead, Will forces himself to say, "I'll understand if you want to go our separate ways after this. If you don't trust my judgement, or - or - if you don't want to forgive me."

Hannibal sighs. "Will? Be quiet."

For a while, Will is. Then, his voice very small, he says, "I missed you."

"I know. I missed you too."

"We just need to keep moving forward now. There'll be time for everything else when we're some place safe."

"All right, Will. Yes."

"Don't try to make me deal with this until then. Please. I'll fall apart."

"Alright," Hannibal says again. "We're leaving the country, aren't we?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

"You aren't going to love it."

"Tell me."

"Margot's got a few hundred little shoats flying out to Haiti - it has something to do with reintroducing an regionally sustainable strain of hogs to the island, I don't really know the details. We're going through customs as their minders."

"I can smell it already," Hannibal says unhappily. "But it's a good plan, Will. And from there?"

Will hesitates. Then he says "Open the glove box. I found something for you."

Hannibal takes the white envelope from the glove box. There is something about it that carries a weight of great import, though from the outside it looks in no way special, and he turns it over in his hands but does not open it.

"It's about Mischa," Will warns.

Hannibal takes the pictures out of the envelope first. The faces that look back at him are considerably aged, but Hannibal knows them; has seen, in the light of a flickering oil lantern, his sister's blood drying on their hands.

"Only the two are still alive," Will says. "As far as I could ascertain. Vladis Grutas is in Belarus. Petras Kolnas has relocated to Argentina."

Kolnas, Hannibal remembers, hadn't been much older than twenty when it all happened - not a war collaborator, just a hanger on, someone who venerated men who had been. The papers in the envelope tentatively puts his age at about 62.

Grutas, on the other hand, is a very old man.

This is how it's going to be, Hannibal thinks, but it is not a bitter thought. He knows that he is being asked to concede the rest of their future to the blade and the rope, to Will's craving to make what he considers justice and to the vicious and amoral avarice that often carries him far beyond vigilantism. This is what Will is offering him, whether he knows it or not.

Hannibal doesn't hesitate.

"Grutas first," he says.

He sees some of the tension lift from Will's shoulders, just a fraction of the fear that Hannibal will be done with him after all that has happened fading away, and Hannibal is glad for that.

Chapter End Notes

This one was like pulling teeth, so I hope that it reads alright. : /

I think we needed a certain degree of tense awkwardness upon their being reunited, especially after what happened with Matthew, though I desperately wish this could have been easier for them.

The good news is that next two are going to be considerably warmer, maybe even a bit fluffy.

Chapter 25

About an hour later, Will leaves the pavement behind for a gravel road that, eventually, leads them to a small fishing cabin. There's a different vehicle waiting there, a dark blue, moderately used Chevy truck.

They get out of the current car, and Will puts it into neutral and walks beside it as he steers it down the boat ramp and into the water. Hannibal stands on the bank and watches him. The water is not terribly deep, but it's enough to swallow the car and hide it from view. Will throws the gun he used to shoot the ambulance driver in after it.

When he turns back, Hannibal sees that Will's face is wet. There is a moment of relief, in which Hannibal readies himself to shepherd Will through the crisis, but then he sees that it is only lake water. The front of Will's shirt is wet where it splashed him.

"How do we know the owners won't come?" Hannibal asks. He is wondering if Will has killed the residents.

"Airbnb," Will says, with just a ghost of a sly smile. "I have the place booked under a fake name for the next two weeks. We shouldn't say more than an hour or so, though."

Then he says, "Come on," and leads Hannibal to the cabin.

When Will opens the door the scents that drift out are enough to make Hannibal's mouth water. Will sees his face, and the tentative smile he gives in return is enough to make Hannibal's chest ache.

"I still know how to make you happy, huh?"

Hannibal sinks down into a kitchen chair while Will plates the food.

It's quail, as Hannibal knew from scent that it would be, on a bed of saffron rice with multi-colored baby carrots and shallots. Will sits the plates on the table, unplugs the crockpot and joins him.

Hannibal raises his fork, but then he hesitates. Across the table, Will is staring at him, a sort of bald hunger that has nothing to do with food plain on his face.

"Will?" Hannibal asks, with a shade of unease.

Will startles. "I'm sorry - I don't mean to make you uncomfortable," he says. He worries his lower lip between his teeth and tries to shift his eyes away from Hannibal, but they find their way back again a few seconds later. "I just - I need to see you eat, alright?"

Hannibal obliges him, bringing the first bite to his mouth. He chews briefly, then allows his eyes to slid closed in bliss.

"Good?" Will asks, anxious despite the obviousness of the answer.

"Hunger is the best spice of all," Hannibal says, after he has swallowed, "but objectively I think this might be the best thing that I have ever tasted."

He goes back to the meal, and feels Will's eyes tracking him as he carefully worries every scrap of meat from the little carcasses with his knife and fork. There is pleasure in this for Hannibal, seeing the return in Will of the familiar prideful joy at having provided for his man that always came into his eyes when they shared game that he'd killed himself, even if that pride is undercut by anxiety. It reassures him that he is cared for.

Hannibal remembers other meals with Will; he remembers what it was like the night that he killed Mason, watching Will watching him as Will speared on his fork a piece of the meat that he had taken from the body, then slid it between his lips to chew with slow and deliberate satisfaction.

He remembers also the chicken that Will brought him when he was still chained in the basement, the miserable way he watched from the corner of his eye as Hannibal ate what he had been given him.

There's misery in Will's eyes now, too, though for different reasons - layers of guilt and shame and fear for Hannibal's health.

Will is working hard to hide that last worry, especially, but Hannibal sees it.

"I'm not sick, you know," he tells Will. "I know you don't want to ask because you're worried about upsetting me, but it's just that I could barely stomach the swill they fed us at the prison." He repeats, "But I'm not sick."

"You've - I'm sorry, Hannibal - you've just dropped so much weight. It's hard for me to not be afraid."

Hannibal resist the urge to smile ruefully at that, because nearly every problem that Will has might be traced back to his need to find ways to not feel afraid.

"I'll be well now," Hannibal reassures him. "How could I not be, when you're cooking for me?"

Will ducks his head shyly, trying to hide his relief.

"I figured that you'd want to shower," Will tells him, when they have finished their meal. Hannibal hasn't eaten as much as Will would have liked, but he has read that starvation shrinks the stomach, and so he tries to remind himself that it will take time for Hannibal to readjust to plentiful and wholesome food. The important thing now, he repeats to himself each time the fretful desire to insist that Hannibal have just a little more, is to avoid hitting Hannibal's food-related triggers inasmuch as possible.

"There's a change of clothes in the bathroom," he goes on. He would like to tell Hannibal to take off the jumpsuit right here and now so Will can take it outside and burn the fucking thing, but the idea of asking him to strip somehow feels both audacious and cruel.

He finds that he is afraid of seeing Hannibal naked - afraid, not only of looking at the damage that his own incompetency has done to Hannibal's body, of seeing the bullet wound and the way that he has been reduced to skin and bones, but also of being unable to conceal his pain at these sights and of hurting Hannibal with that pain.

Because it scares him Will knows that he must do it, but first he goes looking for the liquor cabinet.

There's a lock on the cabinet door that is easily enough broken, but when he gets it open he wonders why their host even bothered; there is nothing in there but a half empty bottle of cheap vodka. Will pulls a disgusted face, the expression elaborate since there is no one to watch him, and then takes a pull from the bottle.

He feels steadier after that, and Will is about to put the bottle away when the memory the sound of Matthew's shoes drumming against the floor of the ambulance when the poison hit him imposes itself forcefully on the inside of Will's head.

So he takes another drink, and then another.

In the master bathroom, Hannibal finds a basket full of toilettes. All of the specific things that he prefers are there, the right type of toothpaste and correct brand of unscented deodorant and the specific sort of aftershave that he's always tended to splurge on.

Even the soap reflects how closely Will has remembered and attended to his preferences; it is the handmade lemon basil soap that Will sometimes picked up for him from one of the artisans at the farmers' market, when they were living together in the safe house. Hannibal wonders how Will came to have it now as he holds the soap in his hand and breathes in the scent of it.

Hannibal hates the way he smells. Poor diet has changed the scent of his body in a way that he finds singularly unpleasant, and he scrubs at himself until the water turns icy.

He dries off and then raises the towel to his face and inhales, and is disgusted to find that the smells of the BSHCI and the prison before it clinging to the fabric. The stink is sunk into his pores, and he is troubled by the possibility that it may have affected his flavor as well as his scent; he wonders if Will might be able to discern some difference - a bitterness, perhaps - should he taste Hannibal's blood or semen. The idea that Will might find him offensive after so long apart is to Hannibal a terrible thing.

It is hard enough to deal the ways in which his body has changed and the pain that he knows those changes will bring to Will. Hannibal studies himself in the full-length mirror that hangs from the bathroom door, taking in the painful thinness; the sharp points of his cheekbones and his collar bones and his hips, the knobbiness of his joints, the starkness of his ribs above his sunken stomach, where the bullet wound stands out in a bright tangle of pink scar tissue.

Mathew had gotten in a few good hits before Hannibal overpowered him, and the bruises are beginning to bloom on his skin now, and he knows that those above all else will be difficult for Will to bear.

Hannibal sighs. He takes the container of lotion from the basket and sits on the edge of the tub to rub it into his skin, hating the roughness that the skin around his ankles and the backs of his hands have taken on even as he luxuriates in the soothing feel of the lotion. When he's done, he puts the lotion back into the basket and stands to tie the towel around his waist.

Will is waiting for him in the bedroom when Hannibal comes out from the bathroom, and when he sits on the edge of the bed Will climbs up in behind him.

He runs his hands over Hannibal's shoulders and down his back artlessly, wanting to be close to him, and though none of Hannibal's insecurities about his appearance or his scent have faded,

Hannibal lets him.

Hannibal was able to smell the alcohol on his breath the instant that Will came within three feet of him, but it's much stronger when Will rests his forehead on Hannibal's shoulder and wraps his arms around him.

It doesn't matter that Will's been drinking, Hannibal decides; if that's the only one of his addictions that he feels compelled to feed for the time being then that's good enough, Hannibal supposes, and he can drive the truck when they leave. But there is a level on which it feels like an insult, that Will should only come to him like this after he has plied himself with alcohol.

But Will is moving. Kisses fall along the knobs of Hannibal's spine and up the back of his neck, and Hannibal allows himself to melt into it. It has been so long since he has been touched like this - since he and Will have been able to touch one another - and he gives into the desire to shudder with delight, allows his breathing to grow fast and ragged to match Will's own.

When Will begins to suck at the skin on Hannibal's shoulder, running his teeth sideways along the already scarred flesh, Hannibal can feel Will's desire and leans into it, eager despite his exhaustion and all else to have Will's teeth in him again.

But Will hesitates to bite down, and in the moment of that hesitation Hannibal finds himself acutely aware of exactly why Will has faltered; he is thinking, Hannibal knows with absolute certainty, that if he were to bite Hannibal now that there is so little flesh interceding between his skin and his scapula that Will would feel his teeth scrape against bone, and the idea fills him with horrified guilt but he is trying not show that, nor to let Hannibal see how the state of his body alarms and hurts Will, because he knows that these things will only make it all harder for Hannibal, and that is another measure of guilt and so Hannibal is not especially surprised by the way the words overwhelm Will, wrenching themselves free with a sound like a sob.

"Let me -" Will begins, and when his words stall Hannibal turns to look at him and says, "Whatever you want, Will."

Will swallows hard and says, "Let me be gentle with you, Hannibal - please. Let me prove I can do better. I know I've hurt you so bad but I promise that I can be soft with you."

"I know you can be soft - you have been before," Hannibal tells him, knowing that when Will speaks of hurting him he doesn't only mean the scars he's left on Hannibal's skin.

His hands on Hannibal now are not gentle, though. They grip hard enough to bruise, but Hannibal lets him hold on.

"Whatever you need," he tells Will. But what he needs now, it seems, is simply to cling to Hannibal, and Hannibal feels the press of Will's forehead against the space between his shoulder blades, and the keening that comes out of Will's throat reverberates within the bone cage of Hannibal's ribs.

It lasts only a few minutes. When Will disengages his face is pale and drained but his eyes are dry. That troubles Hannibal.

Will stands. "We need to get going," he says.

Hannibal nods, accepting the wisdom of that, and begins to get dressed.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Muskrat Farm is empty, save for the four of them.

Margot and Hannibal sit together on the porch, drinking coffee and watching Will and Thomas and the dog playing together on the lawn. A platter of coffee cake sits on the small table between them, and Hannibal works on his piece steadily, calculating inside his head exactly how much he can eat in this sitting without upsetting his shrunken stomach.

It's a curious thing to Hannibal, watching Beth. She'll always be a hound dog, slightly standoffish and with a powerful drive for the chase, but if not for the almost chance intervention that had taken place in her life instead of chasing the boy around the yard playfully she might have been taught how to run after wild pigs and people both until they dropped of exhaustion, to lock her jaws around their flesh and hold them immobile while Will drove a blade between the ribs and sawed into the heart. He wonders if that would have made her a fundamentally different creature, or simply another version of herself.

She seems happy to Hannibal, in this life as a house pet and companion to a small boy, but Hannibal wonders if there is something in her that would rather have her pack and the woodlands and the thrill of the hunt.

Will looks happy too, trailing after Thomas like a puppy himself. When the boy goes down on hands and knees in the sandbox to set about the serious business of driving his trucks through the dunes, Will hunkers down beside him. Hannibal sees Will's mouth move and he sees Thomas answer, but he can't make out what they are saying.

Hannibal turns his eyes back to Margot. She is watching the two of them intently, but there is only a little anxiety in the set of her mouth and the lines around her eyes. When he is near the boy, Will is as clear and pure in his intent as the water in a quick-flowing stream; it would be impossible to seriously doubt the depth of his affection.

"He needed this," Hannibal says. "Thank you for letting him have it."

They hadn't expected the boy to be here with Margot. When he had appeared behind her when she stepped outside to greet him, Will had come to a sudden stop and gripped Hannibal's forearm hard. He'd looked up at Hannibal, his eyes very wide, his face open and full of astonished joy, and Hannibal nodded with his chin to indicate that Will should go on ahead.

Hannibal was by then, utterly exhausted, but he was not so slow on his feet that he failed to hear Will say in a gentle voice, "Hey, sunshine - you miss me?" when he crouched down in front of Thomas.

"I have so much trouble," Margot muses now, "reconciling the way he is at times like this with everything else that I know about him. How can he love us all so much - so sincerely and so deeply - and still do such terrifying things."

Hannibal remembers Will's outraged terror when he found out that Hannibal would be risking his life for a shot at stopping the Dragon from killing anyone else. 'I care about *you* ,' he'd told Hannibal. 'Those people are strangers.'

But that's a harder truth than he wishes to subject Margot to now, in this quiet afternoon interlude. He says instead, "There's so much that's good in him, Margot - that tries so hard to be good," and that's the no less the truth than the other.

"He doesn't see it that way."

"I know," Hannibal says. "He thinks he's ruined my life."

The runty rooster sits nestled in Hannibal's lap, content as it is possessive, and Hannibal's fingers scratch the side of its neck absently.

A few minutes after Hannibal and Margot sat down to talking the chicken came running around the side of the manor, squawking frantically, having (Hannibal assumes) heard his voice. After that, it had accepted nothing less than that Hannibal pick it up and hold it.

The bird and its enduring affection for him embarasses Hannibal. It makes him feel uneasy about himself, and emotionally inadequate; he thinks that if Will had not been so cheerfully insistent upon framing the chicken as being Hannibal's special pet, it never would have occurred to him to think of it as anything other than a future meal.

Margot says, "Will told me about what happened. In the basement."

"Hmm." Hannibal's fingers find a pinfeather, and he takes it as an opportunity to focus his attention on worrying away the keratin sheath to free the new feather. He looks down at the rooster as he does this, rather than Margot, and he wonders if she means that Will told her that Hannibal hit him. "What did he say?"

"That he understands now that he never could have gone through with it."

"He feels that way about it because it would be impossible for him to stomach killing me now. That wasn't what he believed when we were in the basement." This truth neither hurts nor alarms Hannibal. "Will reinvents the narrative and changes himself to suit it," he says, not disapprovingly.

"No amount of reinvention is going to change what he's done."

"I know," Hannibal says, and thinks about the envelope in his pocket.

"When the news reported that one of the EMTs wasn't dead, I wanted to think that meant that he was trying to stop, but I know that's not the truth. He was just humoring me."

"Not 'just' - nothing with Will is a 'just.' He doesn't want to hurt you either."

Margot pushes the plate of coffee cakes towards him, insistent, and Hannibal takes another.

The rooster perks up, entitled, and Hannibal crumbles some of the cake into his palm and offers it to the silkie. The rhythm of the peck of its beak against Hannibal's skin is soothing.

"He's changed since he met you, you know - he didn't used to be so fragile. He was always so completely self-sufficient before; someone sturdy that others' could lean on. You shook him up."

“I know,” he says again.

“But you stabilize him, too.”

In the yard, Will swings Tommy up into the air, and he crows in Will’s arms.

There is something that Hannibal wants to ask of her, but he is not sure how to broach it. He thinks about how Will would approach the request, then he says, “I want to ask you to do something - not for me, for other people - but I’m ashamed because it means asking you to spend money.”

She laughs, and Hannibal is astonished - he's never heard her do that before. “I don’t think that’s likely to be a problem. I have money, Hannibal, and I still owe you.”

He takes the list of names from his pocket, the prisoner ID numbers written beside each one. “These people took care of me when I was at the prison. They need help.” Margot takes the list and studies it, then she looks back up at Hannibal. He isn’t used to people looking at him the way she is now, and it makes him uneasy. “Better legal representation, funds for day to day necessities, media and public attention around their cases, if that’s possible. Whatever help you give them mustn’t be traceable back to you, understand. That would be a risk to all of us.”

“I can manage that, I think,” Margot says, and folds the paper and then puts it in her pocket. “What are you going to do next?” she asks then.

Hannibal looks across the lawn at Will. He thinks about everything he knows about Will, all that he has learned of him and the things that may still exist to be uncovered; his cruelty and vindictiveness, the way that he seeks so desperately to soothe the broken pieces inside of himself with the blood of others, how he soaks the sheets with frantic sweat when the nightmares take him in the dark, his overriding need to help the people he loves - at least as powerful as the drive bring suffering and terror to the ones who fall within his sights - and the way in which his own fears and his self-loathing make it almost impossible for him to accept help in return.

He thinks about how Will struggles to control his own emotions, the way that for the sake of maintaining the boundary lines of his own sense of self he holds himself at a distance from others and yet still convinces almost everyone who meets him that he is warm and soft-hearted, and how that isn’t entirely a mask - not all the time and not with everyone.

Most of all, Hannibal thinks about the way Will’s face breaks open when he is overcome by genuine emotions that are too powerful for him to conceal or which he feels no need to hide, and how when Will looks at him sometimes the awe and admiration and tenderness he feels for Hannibal fills his entire face and seems to make him glow from the inside out, and how it had never before occurred to Hannibal that he might invoke such feelings in another.

“I’m going to give him what he needs,” Hannibal answers. “I’m going to take care of him.”

Chapter End Notes

Story summary be damned, this is NOT the last story in this series. The next one is still a very rough outline, but we haven't seen the last of these two.

I had no idea how complicated and difficult and bloody LONG this story was going to be when I started it, nor did I realize how painful it would be to watch Will and Hannibal suffer in isolation from one another. I want to thank everyone who stuck with it while this fic unfolded, and special thanks to everyone who commented. Ya'll keep me going.

The good news is that the next story will HOPEFULLY be much brighter, though I am hesitant to make too many promises in that regard because we have seen how angst just seems to insert itself into their lives, haven't we?

But I promise to never separate them like this again. These boys are stuck with one another from here on out, and couldn't be happier about that.

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